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OR,

The Last Stroke of the Sand Sharks.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "HUSTLER HARRY," "CAPTAIN
NAMELESS," "OLD DISMAL, THE RANGE
TRAMP," "COLONEL COOL," ETC.

PROLOGUE.

WITHIN a clearing in the depths of the famous French forest of Fontainebleau, where so many deadly meetings have taken place, five men had gathered. From their appearance it was plain an impending duel was the cause of their being there.

The surgeon and seconds were Frenchmen, but the two principals in the affair were Americans, the younger being a beardless youth—scarcely more than a boy—with a frank, open face and a manly bearing.

The youth's foe was a tall, supple-limbed man, with a keen black eye and a drooping mustache that did not entirely conceal the cold and cruel expression about his mouth. He seemed perfectly at ease, as if quite confident in regard to

THEY SHRUNK BACK BEFORE THE SIGHTLESS EYES TURNED UPON THEM. THERE WAS SOMETHING AWFUL, AWE INSPIRING ABOUT THE STRICKEN PARENT'S DEMEANOR.

the result of the coming struggle, and there was a sneer upon his face whenever he glanced at his opponent.

The face of the youth was pale and he seemed somewhat nervous, but there was no show of faltering or cowardice in his manner. It was plain he would be "game" to the last.

The surgeon opened his box of shining instruments while the duelists were making a choice of the polished swords. When it was proposed there should be a toss for first selection, the man of the black mustache shook his head, saying:

"Give the boy his choice. I want him to have as good a show as possible, for I shall kill him, anyway."

He did not mind the reproachful, half-contemptuous look which even his own second bestowed upon him, but waited with folded arms for the younger man to select his weapon. When this was done, he took up the other, bent it, slashed the air a few times, then stepped forward, with the point lowered toward the ground.

"Are ze genteelmen ready?" inquired one of the seconds, in imperfect English.

Both of the duelists bowed. The following moment the word was given, and the shining blades touched with a soft but chilling hiss of steel sliding against steel.

A few moments were spent by the duelists in "feeling," then the desperate battle seemed to begin in earnest. The younger forced the fighting, his face still white as that of a corpse and his eyes gleaming. The other remained on the defensive for the time.

As the moments passed, it became plainly evident that the man of the drooping mustache was more than a match for the youth. For a time he made no aggressive move, but with the sneering smile on his lips, he parried and foiled every stroke and thrust with an ease that told of marvelous skill, as the young man was no mean swordsman. It seemed that when he saw fit to do so the older duelist could end the affair in a few seconds. He was playing with his foe as a cat toys with the mouse it intends to destroy.

Suddenly the aspect of the older man changed. He bent forward with his eyes fastened upon the orbs of his white-faced opponent, his lips parted, he spoke in a tone so low that the words did not distinctly reach the ears of the seconds. But the youth heard every word.

"Your time has come," came from beneath that drooping mustache. "I have fooled with you long enough—now I will kill you! But first, I will tell you what an idiot you have been. Antoinette cares nothing for you; she simply aided me in sucking you dry of the money you earned in the Australian mines."

"Liar!" hissed the youth.

"I speak the truth. You are not the first fool whose money we have enjoyed. You thought she loved you, when she was simply leading you on for me to pluck. You have come here to die because you were jealous of my attentions to her. Long before you ever saw her she was more to me than she ever became to you."

These taunting words seemed to make the youth furious. With a cry of rage, he dashed madly on his sneering foe, striking and slashing in a most reckless manner. The older man laughed in derision, turning every stroke aside with ease.

"I handled a sword before you were out of short clothes, my baby," came contemptuously from his lips. "But I have no desire to waste my time and strength by farther folly. Now, you die!"

But, even as he made the thrust by which he intended to end the young man's life, his foot slipped and he failed in his purpose. The young duelist saw his opportunity, seized it, leaped forward, thrusting straight out and driving his blade clean through his enemy's body.

The stricken man reeled back one step and sunk to the ground, with a low moan, pressing his hand to his bleeding side.

"Curse you!" he faintly gasped. "You have killed me!"

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGER IN JERICHO.

"PEERT! That hain't ther name fer it, stranger! She's er jo-daisy o' ther fu'st rank—you heur me? An' warble—thet gal's got ther throat o' er swan an' ther voice o' er nightengale! Perhaps you don't count on ever gettin' inter heaven? Then you should heur our Zoe sing, an' you'll come mighty nigh bein' thar once!"

Old Plug Ugly's enthusiastic words caused a low laugh to issue from the lips concealed by the tall man's coal-black beard, but with renewed interest he gazed after the retreating form of the beautiful girl who had just passed.

"She certainly has the handsomest face I have seen in a long time," he admitted; "and for that reason she particularly attracted my attention. And her figure—"

"Hole on thar—hole on!" hastily protested Old Plug Ugly, excitedly striking his thick, unshapely hands together. "Don't ye go for ter say ary blamed thing deegratory 'bout her figger! You're er stranger in this yere town, and ye hain't bin roun' ter look at ther cemmertary yet, so ye can't tell how ye'd like ter be burried thar.

Best go slow an' safe tell atter ye picks out yer lot an' has yer tombstun engraved."

"You are a little previous, old man. I was simply about to observe that her figure was probably good, though her attire does not display its outline as it might."

"Probably good?" Waal, I should howl! I'm bettin' my entire pussional property thet she wuz run in ther mold o' an angel! We don't git none o' yer tailor-made togs out hyer"—glancing half-scornfully at the stranger's elegant clothes. "I reckon Zoe putt tergeth'er every blamed rag she has on her back, an' she never tuck no lesson in dressmakin' either."

"Which is a high compliment for her taste. But who is she and what is she?"

"She's ole Blind Bent's gal. Her daddy got both of his lookers spiled by a blast in ther mines. Ever'body reckoned as how he wuz booked for crossin' Jordan by ther quick ferry, but he pulled through, though he'll never git a peep at daylight ergin."

"That was unfortunate. I presume he is a poor man too?"

"Hit ther spike plum on ther head thet time, pard."

"Then he must have some difficulty in getting a living. How do they manage to subsist?"

The elegant stranger was becoming more and more interested in the "Pride of Jericho."

Old Plug Ugly closed one eye in an odd manner and twisted his head to one side, so he could peer upward into his companion's face, as he replied:

"Do you s'pose thet is ther kind o' er gal this yere town'd let starve?"

A strange look came over the tall man's face, and if not a little disappointed, he sneered:

"Oh, she is *that* kind, is she! I would not have thought so by the innocent look on her face."

The next instant he felt his wrist clasped in a grip of steel, and the old man's eyes fairly blazed, as their owner demanded in a low and strangely repressed tone:

"W'at d'yer mean by *that*, stranger? Do you insinowate ary thing 'bout thet gal thet hain't as pure as the angels? Fer ef you *do*, you ur I'll be cold fer plantin' b'fore thirty minutes! Talk straight, stranger!"

The dark eyes of the black-bearded man half-closed as he returned the gaze of the old miner who clutched his wrist, and something like an icy smile crept up from beneath his whiskers. He took his time in replying, noting that Old Plug Ugly's right hand rested on the butt of a holstered revolver.

"I simply accepted the meaning your own words seemed to express," he finally said. "You have yourself to blame for any false impression I may have received."

Old Plug Ugly fairly gasped:

"Waal, dad-burn my tongue! Ef that is so, it must be as how I'm gittin' so I can't talk straight!" As his grasp fell from the tall man's wrist, he added: "But I never meant *that*—fer God's sake don't think I did! I'd as quick breathe slander ag'in' one o' ther Heavenly Choir as erg'in' Leetle Zoe! She hain't got no wings, but 'twouldn't s'prise me er bit ter know that thar wuz er pair sprouted under her shoulder-blades!"

"And so she and her biad father subsist on the charity of Jericho?"

"Not by er derved sight! Ole Bent's proud ez Lucifer, an' ther leetle 'un takes atter him er good bit. No beggin' fer *them*, I tell you! Didn't I say she has er voice like er nightengale? Waal, she sings. We appreciate good music in thi yere town, an' we pays fer w'at we git."

"Ah, that's it!"

"Yep. But ther prospect is we're goin' ter lose her. Ef ther lad wuzn't whiter ther core, I reckon some galood'd feel like jumpin' him an' layin' him out fer keeps. Ez it is, we all 'low he's ther luckiest blamed critter as ever wore breeches, amen!"

"I do not exactly seem to catch your meaning."

"Waal, it's jest this: Leetle Zoe's goin' ter be merried!"

"Married? Why, the girl is not more than sixteen!"

"Thet's correc', pard; but she's engaged jest ther same."

"To whom?"

"A right clean young feller as goes by ther name o' Jack Howard, ur Rattlin' Jack, as some o' ther boys calls him. He'll git her dead shore, ef some o' ther Lan' Sharks don't wipe him out fu'st."

"The Land Sharks?"

"Yep. As measly gang o' outlaws as ever cursed this yere part o' ther kentry. Jack wuz connected with 'em once—pressed inter service ur su'thin' o' thet sort; but he tuck ther fu'st opportunity ter skip ther gang."

"Well, say; I am interested in this. Let's go in and sit down while you give me the points."

Old Plug Ugly did not object, and the two entered the Metropolitan Saloon. When they were comfortably seated at a table with liquor and glasses in front of them, the veteran miner asked:

"W'at is yer handle, stranger, ef ye don't mind? It's best fer us ter kinder interjuce our-

selves. I'm known as Ole Plug Ugly, on account o' my infernally hombly mug. Ef I ever hed ary other name, it wuz so blamed long ago thet I've clean fergot it."

"And I am oftenest called Four Ace Frank, of Frisco. The cog comes from the fact that I have great luck in holding four aces in a game of draw. Your hand, Plug. Now we are acquainted."

The two shook hands across the table.

"Now," added Frank, "take a good bracer, then give me the points about this young man who is fortunate enough to be engaged to the beautiful girl."

"He's er white man, ef he did git tangled up with er gang o' pesky pirates," asserted the veteran miner. "He skipped 'em, an' he w'd 'a' let 'em erlone ef they hed 'lowed it; but ther derved skunks kidnapped his sister 'long with Leetle Zoe, an' he swore fer war."

"Which was quite natural."

"Ther chief o' ther bull pot an' b'ilin' wuz in love with Zoe, but he was tryin' ter skoop in Jack's sister at ther same time, fer she wuz rich."

"He was playing a double game?"

"Yep. He got too much business on his han's. Putty nigh the hull o' Jericho turned out ter re-kiver ther gals. Jack an' er feller as wuz in love with Jack's sister led ther party. Waal, ther Sharks wur rounded up in er cave 'way over yon ermong ther mountains, an' every cuss as wuz captured wuz suspended by ther neck. At thet time, it wuz thought as how ther bull gang hed been wiped clean out, but sense then it hes turned out thet three er four o' ther p'izen crew wuz away on some kind o' crooked business, so they escaped ther dost thet they ought-er got."

"And they—?"

"They hev sworn ter wipe out Jack Howard."

"He will have to keep his eyes open."

"You bet! But he hain't goin' ter stay in Jericho long. His sister an' her husband hev gone back East, an' Jack reckons on follerin' putty soon. Ye see, Ole Tom Bent hain't in prezactly ther shape ter travel now, an' so they are waitin' fer him ter git straightened round."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Waal, ye see, w'en his gal wuz kerried off it made him crazy as er bed-bug. They tried ter keep him under guard, but he got away an' straddled er hoss. Satan hisself don't know how he got thar, but he was in at ther round-up o' ther outlaws—an' him as blind as er bat! He hain't clean got over ther racket yit."

"Then it is not probable Miss Zoe will leave Jericho for some time?"

"Nope."

"Is this Howard worth anything?"

"W'at d' yer mean?"

"Has he any wealth?"

"Not thet I knows of."

"Well, it is almost a shame such a handsome girl should throw herself away on a fellow who can never place her in the sphere she is suited for. Fine dresses and jewels would make her a perfect princess. I believe I shall have to enter the field as Mr. Howard's rival."

Old Plug Ugly half-rose from his seat, as he gazed in astonishment at the Man from Frisco.

"Looker hyer," he growled; "it won't be best fer you ter go monkeying round thet gal—you heur mel! Jack Howard hain't ther lad ter stan' it."

Four Ace Frank laughed easily.

"And what do you think I care for Jack Howard? My dear sir, I have roamed the world over, and never yet have I met the man I feared. I am a singular person. If I set my mind on obtaining a thing, I always possess it in the end. I let nothing balk me. If a man steps into my path—I remove him!"

There was something chilling about the black-bearded man's words and manner, and at that moment Old Plug Ugly conceived a sudden aversion for Four Ace Frank.

"You had best go slow, stranger," grimly observed the old man. "Jack Howard has heaps o' frien's in Jericho, an' I'm one o' ther number. I'll stan' by thet boy as long as I kin dror a breath. Ther hain't no chance fer you ter git Leetle Zoe from him, so you'd best not mingle in."

"Many thanks for your advice. Perhaps I will profit by it—perhaps not. Ah, going? Won't you have another drink? You will not? Well, I thank you for the points you have imparted. So-long."

The Man from Frisco arose almost immediately after the old miner's departure, paid his bill and sauntered out. Old Plug Ugly, who was standing in front of the saloon, was startled by hearing an exclamation of amazement behind him, and the next moment Four Ace Frank clutched the miner's arm, pointing to a passing figure, as he excitedly demanded in a hissing whisper:

"See—who is that man?"

"That," replied the veteran, calmly, "is Jack Howard."

CHAPTER II.

HALF-HAND HUGH STRIKES A SNAG.

"DERNED ef you don't act like you had seen ther lad afore!" declared Plug, gazing curiously

at the 'Frisco sport. "Pr'aps you two hain't strangers, after all."

"Oh, yes, we are!" Four Ace Frank hastened to assert. "I am sure we never met."

"Then w'at mecks ye look ser derved queer? An' yer voice—banged ef thar hain't an odd change in it!"

Frank laughed shortly.

"To tell the actual truth," he acknowledged, "the fellow did remind me of a person I once knew; but as his name is Howard and the individual he reminded me of bore quite a different title, it is plain it was simply a resemblance."

With these words, Four Ace Frank sauntered slowly after Jack Howard, apparently paying little attention to which direction he pursued, but really keeping the young man in view.

Old Plug Ugly shook his head and scowled till his homely face looked little short of repulsive.

"He didn't talk straight, not by er derved sight," muttered the veteran. "Thar's suthin' 'bout thet galoot thet kinder sticks in my ole woosle, but banged ef I know jest w'at it is, meself! He's er sing'ler kind o' cuss—er card-sharp as greenies hed best steer clear of. An' ther way he looked at Jack—an' ther way his voice sounded—" The aged miner broke off abruptly, once more shaking his head as he watched the 'Frisco sport's retreating figure from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"He's follerin' Jack," Plug finally muttered again. "Reckon I'll jest foller him."

Jack Howard walked straight to the principal hotel of the camp, where a small crowd had collected to witness the arrival of the regular stage from Pick Pocket, which was then overdue. Having nothing else to do just then, Jack mingled with the throng. Seeing this, Four Ace Frank murmured:

"I will take my chances of being recognized, if it is he. Two to one he will not know me."

A few moments later the sport also joined the crowd, and in a short time Old Plug Ugly came up.

"Thar she comes!" exclaimed one of the throng, as the coach hove into view. "Billy is sending her right along."

There was a whirl of dust far down the trail, in the van of which danced the coach as it was snatched along by four sinewy horses. The driver's long whip writhed through the air like a flying serpent and cracked over the heads of the animals with a report equal to a pistol-shot.

"He's makin' up fer lost time," observed another of the men in front of the hotel.

A clattering roar, a cloud of dust, a shout, and the stage was at a full stop in front of the hotel, every horse having settled almost on its haunches. The next moment Billy McEasy was at the door of the coach, hat in hand.

"Be aisy theer, Whiskers!" he cautioned. "Always allow a leddy th' roight av way."

The red face and bristling red beard of a man appeared at the door, but Billy unceremoniously thrust the fellow back. The following moment a female appeared, and the gallant driver assisted her to alight. A glance showed she was not more than twenty-five years of age and attractive, if not beautiful. But the smile she gave Billy was simply dazzling, for it was the perfection of art in that line, and in an instant every man who saw it stood ready to swear she was the handsomest woman he ever saw.

"Ze monsieur have my t'anks," she murmured, speaking in a soft and musical tone that made her broken English pleasant to the ear.

At the sound of her voice, Jack Howard started violently and bent forward to catch a glimpse of her face, which thus far he had not perfectly seen. As she ascended the steps, he was gratified, and he fell back a step, a low exclamation escaping his lips. That seemed to attract her attention, and her eyes met his squarely for a single instant, then she glided on and disappeared within the hotel.

She had betrayed no sign of recognition.

All this time—a few moments—one of the hotel attendants had been unstrapping a large trunk from the rear of the stage. The man worked lively, for he knew the driver would be in a great hurry, as he was behind time.

"Come on theer, me sunflower!" cried the impatient Jehu. "Be after hilpin' yerself out av thit, koin'd av loively, will yez! Oi hiv not a bit av toime t' waste." Then he turned to the crowd, dropped his left elbow into his right hand and put his left hand to his mouth, as he said in a stage whisper:

"Jist take a luk at the crayther as he comes out av the dure an' be afther tellin' me if yez know th' name av it. Be Hivens! it b'ates my toime kimplately!"

The red-whiskered passenger appeared. He was a small man, but his attire was that of a would-be cowboy. It was plain his clothes had originally been manufactured for a man several sizes larger than the one they adorned, and they gave the little fellow a ridiculous aspect. Around his waist was a belt that fairly bristled with weapons of various descriptions.

But it was the man's florid face and fiery whiskers which caught the eye. His beard had been clipped to a length of about two inches and stood out in every direction like porcupine-quills. His broad-brimmed hat was thrust back

on his head, and the hair escaping from beneath it was as red and stiff as his beard.

As this strange passenger reached the ground he slapped the driver on the back with his open hand, causing that worthy to whirl round with an exclamation.

"Looker hyer!" growled the red-head, tipping his head to one side and glaring up at Billy in a manner that was plainly intended to be terrifying. "D'yer know me?"

"Thapn Hiven, Oi do not!" was the prompt reply. "Oi shall always consider it wan av the narrowest escapes av me loife."

The next moment, the mail-bag and the lady's trunk having been removed, Billy swung himself up to his seat, seized the reins, cracked his whip, gave a shout—and away went the stage.

The man of the red beard fairly danced in his excitement and rage.

"I'm Bad Man Bob!" he howled. "I'm called ther Holy Terror on Trucks! An' thet dad-blanked Irishman insulted me! Oo-o-o! Woosh!"

He snatched out a revolver and fired several shots into the air, after which he pranced up the steps and disappeared within the hotel.

Jack Howard left the throng and walked rapidly away.

"Is it possible I was deceived?" he muttered. "That face and voice—and she is French! But, what can have brought her here? I must be mistaken! She did not recognize me, even though she looked me fairly in the face. Still, that woman had a wonderful nerve. It may be! Anyway, I am glad I am not going to remain in this town long."

His thoughts troubled him so much that afternoon that in the evening he decided to visit the hotel and examine the Register.

"I will see what name she has signed," he thought.

As he entered the combined bar-room and office of the hotel, he heard a hoarse voice crying:

"Looker this critter, will ye, pards! Hain't it poorty! Wonder whar it struck all them thar fine togs? Hole on, Mister Store Clothes; I want ter talk w' ye."

A huge, broad-shouldered, half-drunken ruffian blocked Four Ace Frank's path.

"I'm suthin' of a stranger in this yere town," declared the tough; "but I'm er howler, bet yer wealth! My name's Half-Hand Hugh. Don't s'pose you know me ur ever heard of me, did ye, Store Clothes?"

"Great Scott!" muttered Jack Howard. "If that is not one of the Land Sharks supposed to have been killed in Pick Pocket, I don't know my own name!"

"Will you stand aside?" came quietly from the 'Frisco sport's lips.

"Ho, ho, ho!" chuckled Half-Hand Hugh. "W'at's thet you say, poorty 'un? Me stan' aside! Wal, I sh'ud snicker!"

"If you do not stand aside, I shall be compelled to knock you down."

The tough caught his breath in a gasp of amazement.

"W'at's thet?" he demanded. "You knock me down?"

"That is what I said."

"Wal, I'll be dom'd!"

After glaring at the sport a moment, the ruffian slowly lifted his right hand.

"Looker thar," he said, displaying the fact that every finger of the hand was missing. "Thet thing I hed made thet way on pupose. It's er reg'ler batterin'-ram. Stranger w'en it comes to knockin', you hain't in it. Look out, now, fer I'm goin' ter give you this thing right smack atween ther lookers!"

He suddenly lunged out at Four Ace Frank, but the stroke was easily parried. Then came a sudden "smack," and a moment after, Half-Hand Hugh was reclining at full length on the floor. The Man from 'Frisco had knocked the tough down with a single swinging blow.

"Seems ter me I heard suthin' drap," mumbled the bully, as he sat up and looked around. "Must be I fell down. Reckon I'm all right ef I didn't step on myself."

Then he observed that Four Ace Frank was walking calmly toward the door. Swiftly he scrambled to his feet, and just as the 'Frisco sport was passing Jack Howard, the tough's perfect hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

"Hole on, hole on, pard!" cried Half-Hand. "Ther fun hain't over, by er derved sight! Thet's only ther fust round. I kin stan' thet kind of a racket fer a nour an' come up smilin' every time. But, all I want is ter git one good wipe at you with my batterin'-ram. Thet'll lay ye out fer plantin'!"

He did not realize he was too drunk to fight, so he made another sweep at the sport. He met with the same reception as before. Frank parried the clumsy blow and promptly knocked the tough down.

The next instant the Man from 'Frisco uttered a hoarse shout and flung himself bodily against Jack Howard!

CHAPTER III.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

FOUR ACE FRANK'S sudden move was quite unexpected by Jack, and the young man was

nearly hurled off his feet. But he was as nimble and quick as a cat, making it a difficult thing to overthrow him.

As he staggered to one side, he clutched at the stock of a handy revolver, wheeling to face the attack he expected would swiftly follow. An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips as he did so, for he saw a knife gleaming in the right hand of a thick-set, repulsive-looking negro, who was beating a hasty retreat through the open doorway.

Just as the negro disappeared, Four Ace Frank snapped out a revolver and fired—but not at Jack Howard. It must have been by the barest chance the black man escaped the pellet of lead that followed him through the doorway.

"The cursed black whelp has escaped!" cried the 'Frisco sport. "But he was not an instant too soon. In another moment I would have bored him."

Jack stood with his ready revolver in his hand, a puzzled look on his handsome face.

"I am not sure I quite grasp the situation," he confessed.

"That black devil was on the point of knifing you in the back when I thrust you aside," explained Frank. "As it was, he barely missed you, and that is all."

"And I am indebted to you for my life?"

"Possibly so; though he might not have touched a vital spot. Still, I do not believe you would fancy having a sticker sheathed between your shoulder-blades. As it was, he slashed your sleeve."

Jack glanced at his left sleeve and discovered that the Man from 'Frisco told the truth.

"Well, that is what I should designate as a close call," he acknowledged, as he lowered the hammer of his revolver and replaced the weapon in his pocket. "This gives you a big score against me. Perhaps the time may come when I can even the account. Will you shake?"

Four Ace Frank seemed to hesitate an instant, but he accepted the proffered hand, saying quietly:

"I consider myself fortunate in having been able to save you from the knife of that murderous nigger. You will have to look out for the black devil after this. But now I must attend to my friend of the half-hand."

But Half-Hand Hugh had vanished during the excitement.

"It is possible he got enough fun out of me to satisfy him for the present. If he is satisfied, I am sure I shall not kick. But, now this excitement is over, I would like to pick up a little game. I am in Jericho for business. Do you ever indulge in draw, my friend?"

A dark look came over Jack Howard's face, as he replied:

"I never do—now. I have had my day at cards, and I hate the cursed things!"

Four Ace Frank lifted his eyebrows.

"It must be you played in hard luck?"

"It was not so much that."

"Then you were fairly successful?"

"I enriched a professional gambler with a small fortune he easily succeeded in skinning from me."

"And you swore off for that reason?"

"Well, not exactly. But, I do not like to speak of it. I came near losing my life as well as my money."

"I beg your pardon if I have seemed inquisitive. I make my living at cards, but it is my boast I play a strictly honest game."

"It is probable you will find it easy to strike a game at the Metropolitan. There is very little playing here at the hotel. The would-be sports all congregate at the saloon."

"Then you have some high sports in this town?"

"I can not say how high they are," laughed Jack. "Desperate Durg played a pretty stiff game, I am told; but he has passed in his chips, and I do not think a successor has filled his boots."

"Possibly I may serve as his successor."

"You will be unfortunate if you obtain as unsavory a reputation as he left behind him."

"How was that?"

"He was found to be the chief of a band of outlaws, known as the Land Sharks."

Four Ace Frank half-closed his eyes and gazed at Jack in a queer manner.

"The Land Sharks?" he repeated. "I have heard of them, and it seems to me I also heard that you—you were—somewhat—"

The younger man's face crimsoned a little, but he threw his head back haughtily, as he replied:

"I was forced into their band. I left it of my own free will when I discovered what a dastardly set of villains they were. I should not have troubled them again if they had let me alone, but they saw fit to kidnap my sister."

"And now the survivors of the band are doing their best to wipe you out. You will have to look sharp or they will succeed."

"I shall keep my eyes quite wide open, I assure you."

After a few words more they parted, the sport leaving the hotel, while Jack turned toward the desk to examine the Register.

There were but two arrivals for the day, the

first to register having simply written: "Mdle. Dupont."

"That is not the name I am looking for," muttered Jack, shaking his head; "but I believe that handwriting looks like hers. It may be she has changed her name. I must watch for another sight at her."

As he stood with his finger on the page of the Register, it happened to point to the name directly beneath that of the late lady arrival. He did not notice the fact till a guttural voice growled at his side:

"Thet's my handle, pard. Are ye lookin' fer me? Ef so, I'm right hyer. Is it war?"

With some surprise he looked down upon an upturned face that was covered with a bristling red beard, recognizing the second passenger to leave the stage that day. The peculiar little fellow glared back at him in a manner that was intended to be decidedly savage.

"Thet's my handle," he again repeated. "I'm Bad Man Bob, the Bruiser. Whoop! I'm a hard case, partner. Jest take a squint at this yere left eye of mine an' hang on ter yerself or ye'll faint. D'yer see ther blood in it? Thar's gore thar—red, red gore!"

"It must be some one struck you in the eye, then," smiled Jack.

"Wat!" howled the red beard. "Struck me—me? Thunder an' sulphur! It can't be you know anything of me! Are you crazy, young man? Hev ye lately 'scaped from some loonertick 'sylum? Struck me! Great howlin' Hottentots! I'd exterminate ther cuss thet durst think of sech er thing! I'd sot down on him, an' eternally squelch ther gizzard outter him! I'd seize him in my iron grasp an' rend him limb from limb! Boy, I'm ther wu'st bad man you ever laid your eyes on!"

"I am inclined to believe you have been drinking."

The little fire-eater gave a snort of disgust.

"Drinkin'?" he echoed. "D'yer s'pose I'd tetch ther stuff they peddle out hyer? W'y, it hain't fit fer er babby ter drink! Thar hain't no snap to it! W'y, up in Hell Hole, whar I kem from, they hev an electric battery connected with ther bar an' mix chain-lightnin' with ther drink. I c'u'dn't git up a fuddle on ther dish-water they hev hyer."

"Then you must be a bad man, indeed."

"Now, you are jest beginnin' ter tumble ter my dimentions," and he thumped the desk with his clinched fist, but made a wry face as if he had hurt himself. "I'm er howlin' horror, I am! I'm allus a chief wherever I go. W'en I git on my war-paint, I'm goin' ter take this measly little town. W'en you see I'm fairly started, jest you lay low, boy. I dunno as I want ter hurt ye, fer ye look kinder innercent-like, but thar's certain ter be er terrific slaughter w'en I let's myself loose. I give ye fair warnin' now, so you kin escape ther cyclone."

"Many thanks."

"Oh, thet's all right," with a careless wave of one hand. "I never like ter hurt children. Thar hain't nothin' cruel 'bout me ef I am a badman. But, speakin' 'bout dogs, who wuz thet fellar I saw ye chinnin' with er short tim ergo?"

"What fellow?"

"Ther tall man with ther black beard. I reckon I hev seen ther galoot afore."

"I believe I did not ask his name."

"Then he's er stranger in this yere town?"

"Yes."

"Dunno whar he kem from?"

"I do not."

"Waal, thet's too bad. Is he on it?"

"On what?"

Bad Man Bob doubled up his fist and moved it up and down while with his other hand he felt of his arm half-way between the shoulder and elbow.

"Oh," laughed Jack, "on his muscle?"

The little fire-eater nodded.

"Well, I can't say. Anyway, he was looking for a little game."

The red beard leaped into the air and cracked his heels together.

"Whoop! I'm his mutton! I'll play him fer one thousan' or five. But, soft! I counted my wealth ter-day, an' I wuz prezactly fifty cents short of five thousan'. Ef he sh'u'd want ter play fer thet sum, I'd be stumped. Pard, can't ye lend me fifty cents tell ter-morrer? Ef ther galoot of ther black beard has any riches, I will be flyin' high at another sunrise."

"I am sorry," replied Jack; "but I do not happen to have a half about me."

The bad man glared at Howard for a moment as if he contemplated annihilating him, but evidently thinking better of it, he turned and strode out of the room, cutting a grotesque figure as he departed.

Jack did not immediately follow, but as he stood by the Register, his thoughts turned to Little Zoe, who had promised to become his wife. If he could have looked into Blind Bent's cabin at that moment he would have seen the object of his thoughts bending over the rude cot on which her sleeping father lay tossing and muttering.

Suddenly Bent awoke and sat upright.

"Zoe!" he called, a little wildly, stretching out his arms, his sightless eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Here, daddy!" and in an instant she was clasped to his heart, while he murmured brokenly:

"Thank God! thank God! thank God!"

"What is it, daddy?" she softly asked, her arm around his neck and her soft cheek close to his bearded one. "You are trembling so!"

"It was a dream," he whispered, as if afraid to trust his voice. "But, you are here in my arms, little one. I do not get much rest now, for when I sleep I dream."

"You should not let your fancies trouble you so, daddy. We are all right now, for our enemies are all destroyed."

"I hope so, little one, I hope so! But, sometimes it seems as if they were not all destroyed. Sometimes I am sure some of them are left. But they shall not separate us, Zoe. We will cling together and trust in God. You are my all, now that I shall never again see the glorious sunshine. My God! what a horrible thing to be blind, blind, blind!"

There was a cadence of despair in his voice that cut her to the heart and caused the tears to start into her blue eyes.

"I will always be your eyes," she asserted.

He strained her to his heart again.

"My eyes—you are my very life! If I had a thousand eyes I would give them all rather than see harm come to you! I would lay down my life for you, little one!"

"I know it, daddy, I know it. But, I do not like to have you talk this way, you get so excited. You must keep quiet and try to become strong for the journey, for you know we are going to leave this part of the country soon—we are going to Kentucky, where Jack's sister has gone."

"Yes, yes," he repeated, slowly, his head drooping. "And you are going to be married—you, my baby! I can't hardly make it seem so. Why, you are not old enough to get married, Zoe!"

"I am 'most seventeen, and you know we are not going to be married for a year. I shall be almost eighteen then."

The blind man drew a long breath and thrust her out at arm's length, turning his sightless eyes on her as if he could see and would survey her figure.

"I—can't—hardly—believe—it," came slowly from his lips. "It seems like it was only yesterday you were a teeny thing in your mother's arms. Your mother—God bless her!—if ever a woman went straight to heaven it was she! And I know you are so like her as I knew her first. She was handsome, Zoe! Her hair was strands of sunshine and her eyes two bits of Heaven's purest blue! I have only one regret—I was never able to give her the home she deserved."

"But you were happy, daddy."

"Yes, we were happy. Still I was forever looking forward to something better and brighter. It never came. Now, I can only look back. It won't be many years at the most before I go to join your mother. It is a sad thing to think the best of my life is spent and there is nothing in the future but eternal darkness! I would still be happy if the light of day were not denied me, but to grope through this fearful blackness—it is horrible!"

He covered his eyes with his hands and groaned as only a strong man in deepest anguish can. He little knew how his words and acts wrung the heart of his child. In a moment she was sobbing on his bosom.

"Oh, daddy, daddy! I am so sorry—so sorry!"

"What!" he gasped, astonished—"crying, little one, crying? What have I been saying? I have been talking like an old fool! There, there, child! You will spoil your eyes, and then think of the fix you'd be in! Just you hush up!"

In this rude way, he did his best to check her tears, and soon succeeded.

"You mustn't mind my foolish ranting. Tain't the thing for a big girl as is going to get married to be crying. And you are going to get a good man I hope."

"I am sure Jack is a good man, daddy."

"I don't reckon God'd be cruel enough to get you hitched to a bad man after letting me lose my eyes in this way. That is trouble enough for us. But my dream—I can't quite get it out of my head. There is trouble of some kind coming, Zoe."

"Oh, it is nothing but a dream."

"Still it's a warnin' of trouble. There is a man who will try to come between you and Jack."

"He will not succeed."

"Perhaps not by fair means, but he has a black heart. He will not hesitate at anything. You must beware of him. If I only had my eyes! I saw him in my dream and—Great God! I see him now!"

He leaped to his feet with one hand outstretched. Zoe turned just in time to see the face of a man disappear from the window toward which her father was pointing.

CHAPTER IV.

CHOOSING A CHIEF.

THE flaring light of several smoking torches revealed a collection of seven ruffianly looking characters who had gathered in a mountain

cave. Uncertain though the torchlight was, it was sufficient to reveal their true nature as depicted on their countenances. Craftiness, dishonesty, ruffianism—these traits were plainly written on their faces.

Of the seven men, three had belonged to the original band of Land Sharks. Black Rule, the gigantic negro who had tried to stab Jack Howard in the Jericho hotel, was absent at the time when the outlaws were captured and lynched, so he escaped the well-deserved fate of his comrades in crime. Half-Hand Hugh it was believed had been killed in a brawl in Pick Pocket, but, like a bad penny, he turned up when least expected.

The third man was known as Sam Slick, and he it was who had been instrumental in the betrayal of the original band, a fact which was unknown to his comrades. Had they known of it, there would have been little hesitation in ending his treacherous career and avenging Captain Shark and his followers.

The others were new recruits, for they had gathered for the purpose of reviving the supposed-to-be extinct band. They were all hard characters—men with dark records, and it was plain none of them would hesitate at any act the result of which they would consider to their benefit.

"Pards," spoke Half-Hand Hugh, "you all know ther puppose why we are collected. We hev sworn er mighty oath ter stan' by each other through thick an' thin ter death, an' I reckon we all mean it. Ther cuss w'at turns traitor will get a through ticket ter Glory—or t'other place."

Growls of assent came from the villainous throng.

"Now, ther next thing onter ther programmy is ther 'lection of er chief—an' thet's mighty 'portant."

"You bet."

Sam Slick stepped forward, bowing his lank figure and passing his hands over each other as if washing them in invisible water.

"Permit me," he said, with a smile that contorted his skinny face till it looked like a grotesque mask—"permit me to offer my services. I think I can fill the situation in a very pleasing manner."

"Git out!" snarled the Half-Hand. "You'd meck a hill-roarin' ole chief, now w'u'dn't ye! W'at we want is er man—er man from ther ground up. We shell hev some hot work on our han's fer we hev one traitor to dispose of."

"Who?"

"Rattlin' Jack. He went back on ther ole band an' wuz in with ther gang as helped wipe 'em out. But he shell pay fer it. Rule an' I hev tried ter finish him off, but luck hes bin ag'in' us."

"I was Captain Shark's most trusted man," declared Slick. "He always gave me charge of his most difficult work."

"Because you've got er slick tongue in yer head. He knew whar ye wuz vally'ble, but you hain't no more fitten ter be ther chief than a babby. Come off yer perch an' let somebody else hev er chance!"

Slick gave the Half-Hand an ugly look, but fell back without another word.

"Now, who is ther man best fitten fer ther chief?"

"I am!"

The voice came from the darkness near at hand, and the next moment a tall figure advanced and confronted the astounded men.

"Slow an' easy, my hearties!" cried the unknown, as several of the Sharks reached for their ready weapons, at the same time uttering savage oaths. "I hold all the high keerds in ther pack. See?"

In each of his hands glittered a cocked revolver.

A laugh came from beneath the mask which concealed the man's face, for, recognizing the danger, the outlaws made no further move to draw just then.

"Thet's right, pards," he nodded. "I hain't got no desire ter lay out any of ye, but I jest sh'u'd hev ter do it ef ye wuz contrary. Keep cool an' we'll come ter an understandin'."

"Who in blazes are you?" snapped Half-Hand Hugh, still grasping the butt of an undrawn revolver.

"It don't meck so very much difference jest who I am now," was the reply. "Hereafter you will know me as Captain Shark. Thet's business straight."

"Waal, I do admire your gall!"

"Of course you do; but I've got ther sand ter back it."

"Thet remains ter be seen. But how in thunder did you kem hyer?"

"Now, don't go to askin' too many questions. I'm hyer; thet's enough fer ther present."

"Waal, w'at d'yer want?"

"I thought I had made my desire known. I want ter be chief of this bold band."

"Then ye'll hev ter take it out in wantin'."

"Soft, soft! Not so fast, pard! I'll bet ye ten ter one I git ther posish. Do ye durst take it?"

"You'll git fitten fer er coffin."

"Not w'ile I hole ther drop. Now, I really want to be chief hyer—an' I'm goin' ter be!"

"You'll hev ter prove yerself ther best man of ther crowd."

"Is that all?"

"I reckon you'll fine thet's ernough."

The masked unknown laughed.

"W'y, this is goin' ter be easier than I counted on," he said. "How will ye have it, pards?"

"You'll hev ter show thet ye're ther best all-round man, an' thet means ye kin out-shoot, out-rastle, out-fight an' out-lift ther gang. Stranger, ther job's too big fer ye."

"Wal, I guess not! If you critters will promise not ter jump me the instant I lower these barkers, I'll be with ye."

Half-Hand Hugh chuckled hoarsely.

"Oh, we won't jump ye, pard, but you'll never git out out of hyer erlive. D'yer see this nigger?" pointing to the massive figure of Black Rule.

"My eyes are good."

"Wal, he's ther fu'st man ye'll hev ter tackle, an' ef he don't break yer back in less'n two shakes, I'm er fool!"

"A reckless statement," came calmly from beneath the mask. "After I am done with ther nigger, you'll be known as Half-Hand Hugh, ther Fool."

"Talk is cheap."

"Correc'. I'm hyer fer business. I shell trust ter your honor pards an' place myself in your power—see."

He lowered the hammers of his revolvers and restored them to his pockets.

"Thet is sufficient proof thet I am in earnest."

"Wal, you're er bigger fool then I took ye fer," muttered Half-Hand.

"You will sing a different chune soon," laughed the would-be chief.

Then he whirled toward the negro, saying:

"The only thing I ask of you is thet you will not try ter tear off this mask while we are rasselin'. Will ye promise?"

"I s'pose we can have ther privilege of takin' it off after ye are dead, can't we?" asked Rule.

"Certain, sure, I shall not kick then."

"Wal, it will be removed in less'en three minutes after you git inter my clutches," was the negro's boastful assertion. "I hev killed more'n one man with my bare han's."

"But you will find me your master."

Preparations were made for the contest, the outlaws chuckling with delight at the prospect of the sport is store. It was to be a rough and tumble battle.

In a few moments the signal was given and the black man and his unknown opponent sprung forward for the grapple.

CHAPTER V.

A HARD MAN TO DOWN.

As neither of the men had stripped for the struggle, very little could be told about the unknown except that he was tall and supple in appearance. But, it did not seem possible he could prove a match for the brawny negro, who had the neck of a prize-fighter and whose massive frame appeared all bone and sinew.

The two wrestlers sprung forward and halted within two paces of each other, assuming crouching positions that reminded the spectators of panthers about to spring. The flaring light of the smoking torches threw a strange, fitful glow over the impressive tableau.

Straight into each others' eyes glared the unknown and the negro.

"Ho, ho, ho!" chuckled the latter. "What a fool you have made of yourself, boy! I'm jest goin' ter break you all up into small chunks. W'en I get through with you, thar won't be enough of you left to bait a rat-trap."

"Do you really think so, my dark-complected frien'? Waal, you never made a bigger mistake in all your life. You're goin' ter run butt ergain' er snag. I'll tell ye now I'm er mighty hard man ter down."

"You won't be a flea-bite fer me, critter. I'll crush ye like I wuz a grizzly b'ar."

"Waal, go ahead with yer crushin' an' guv us less of yer jaw. I'm waitin' fer ye."

With a savage snarl, the black ruffian rushed at his opponent. The unknown did not shrink, but met the shock squarely, and the next instant the two were clasped in each other's arms.

"Now I hev ye!" growled the negro.

Black Rule exerted all his terrific strength to crush the breath from the masked man's body, but it was plain the unknown had expected such a trick, for he grasped the negro in such a manner that Rule's hug was of little effect.

"Thet is jest a babby squeeze," laughed the mask. "I hev known pretty gals ter hug harder'n that."

The negro ground out an oath.

"Ef I only hed ye 'crost ther small of ther back an' clear of thet left arm!" he gritted.

"Oh, if you only did. Wal, I wuz watchin' out fer thet."

"Then I'll hev ter floor ye."

But the wearer of the mask was not so easily floored, as the negro soon discovered. Back and forth swayed the two men, round and round they whirled. The watching Sharks were in a fever of excitement.

"Darned ef I don't believe he's goin' ter guv Rule er hard tussle!" gasped Half-Hand Hugh,

in the greatest amazement. "Cuss my hide ef I'd believed it!"

"Car-r-ramba!" came rolling from the lips of a Spanish ruffian. "He will be more than a match for our man!"

For several minutes the struggle continued in all its fury.

Black Rule began to puff from his exertions, but if the unknown was losing his wind, he managed to conceal the fact. He appeared as fresh as at the start.

"Are you ther devil?" panted the negro.

"Not exactly," was the laughing reply.

"But I am one of his most faithful servants."

"If I had only obtained my hold—"

"But as it is—down you go!"

The black man's feet were suddenly knocked from beneath him, and the next instant he found himself on the floor with his opponent lying across his prostrate body. As Rule's hold was broken by the fall, the masked unknown immediately arose to his feet, stepped back two paces and folded his arms over a breast which scarcely seemed to heave in an unusual manner, despite the fierceness of the struggle just terminated.

Cries of amazement came from the lips of the watching outlaws, and they gazed at the stranger both in wonder and admiration.

"He's er holy terror!"

"Bet yer boots!"

"Carajo! Demonio Gringo!"

"But he hein't through with me yit," snarled Black Rule, as he slowly arose to his feet.

"Thet's ther fu'st time I wuz ever throwed by any livin' man, an' thet wuz foul."

"You lie!" came distinctly from beneath the mask. "It was to be a rough-and-tumble contest, and anything is fair in such a struggle."

The negro glared at the masked man as if he would annihilate him, but his gaze was calmly returned.

Rule's thick lips curled back from his wolfish teeth, as he growled:

"You shell hev a chance ter try it over, an' next time I will kill ye!"

The unknown threw out one hand in a contemptuous gesture.

"You are talking about something you are not able to do," he declared, quietly. "Next time I shall not use you as easy as I did this."

This was too much for the negro to stand. His anger would not permit him to wait till he could fairly regain his breath. With a howl of fury, he rushed upon the masked man.

A cry broke from the lips of the watching Sharks, for it seemed that the black man had caught his foe at an advantage, as he had obtained both under-holds. Now, if ever, would Black Rule squeeze the breath from the stranger's body.

But before the negro could exert his strength a surprising thing occurred.

The masked man's left arm was passed over Rule's right shoulder and behind the negro's back, his right being doubled at the elbow and thrust under the black ruffian's chin. Quick as thought, the would-be chief of the Land Sharks pressed forward on the outlaw's windpipe and thus threw Rule's chin into the air as his head was tilted backward. Had he exerted his entire strength, the negro's thick neck would have snapped like a pipe-stem.

Black Rule had a chance to catch one rasping breath, but after that his windpipe was closed and he could not breathe. It seemed as if his head would be torn from his body. He tried to crush his opponent, but his strength had suddenly deserted him. His eyes began to bulge from their sockets and black spots floated before his vision. His courage deserted him as had his strength, and he tried to cry enough, but not a sound could he utter.

Like statues, the outlaws stood staring in astonishment at the amazing spectacle. The black mask of the unknown hid the expression of his face, but they plainly saw the look of horror and agony on Black Rule's countenance, which was tipped backward till the bulging eyes seemed staring appealingly at them.

"Great God!" gasped Half-Hand Hugh. "He is killing the nigger!"

And, although this really seemed true, not a man lifted a hand to save their comrade. They all seemed paralyzed.

The black spots which floated before the negro's vision became mingled with a blood-red haze. His brain seemed on fire and ready to burst with the terrible pressure upon it. Everything whirled round and round—then came a great flood of darkness.

Gently the unknown lowered the black man's body to the floor. Black Rule's arms fell limply at his sides, and the powerful negro lay quite still.

He was unconscious!

Again the masked wonder straightened up and folded his arms, calmly facing the staring outlaws.

For the space of a minute not a sound broke the silence of the underground chamber. The victor stood boldly facing the six men who remained on their feet, the body of his late opponent lying limply before him. The light of the flaring torches made it a weird and singular picture.

Suddenly one of the men leaped forward, a glistering knife in his hand.

"He has killed our pard!" he shouted. "I will have his heart's blood!"

But even as the outlaw sprung forward, the masked unknown met him half-way, grasped his wrist, gave it a wrench that caused him to drop the knife, then sent him reeling backward with a blow fairly between his eyes.

"Many thanks," came from beneath the sable mask, as the man stooped and picked up the knife. "I hev no blade of my own, but this yere seems ter be er good tool. Now, ef you want ter knife me, pard, I'm reddy ter ther sacrifice. Wade in."

The outlaw was quickly supplied with another knife by a comrade, then he again advanced toward the mask, who calmly awaited his approach.

"Curse you!" growled the Shark. "You may have strength enough to get away with the nigger, but this will be a battle of skill as well as strength."

"Correct you are."

"And I'm going to wipe you out. I am Dividend Dave, and all the boys say that I am the worst cuss who ever handled a toothpick. I reckon you do not know much about a knife?"

"W'at mecks you think so?"

"You do not carry one."

"Is thet a sure sign? Waal, wade in, David, an' you will soon diskiver whether you are right or not."

Clash! the knives met and were held together, while the two men gazed straight into each other's eyes. The orbs which gleamed through the twin holes in the mask seemed black as midnight.

Clash! clash! clash! stroke after stroke was met and foiled by the unknown. Dividend Dave pressed the fighting, apparently feeling quite confident in regard to the result. But it soon became apparent that the stranger had handled a knife before. His skill in foiling the outlaw's vicious strokes was something surprising.

"Curse you!" hissed Dave. "It must be you are in league with Satan!"

"As I told your dark-kimplected friend, I am one of his most faithful servants," was the reply. "He has allus stocd by me thus fur, an' I don't reckon he'll desert me now."

"But I'll have your heart's blood just the same!"

"You are welcome ter it ef you kin git it."

But Dividend Dave had met his match. Try as he might, he could not touch the masked man with his knife. On the other hand, the unknown began to slash dangerously near the outlaw's breast, again and again cutting through the red shirt, but not quite reaching the flesh. In a short time Dave's shirt was slashed into strips. Still no blood was drawn.

"Now," came quietly from beneath the mask, "I am going to crowd ye, David."

And crowd him he did. Step by step the outlaw was forced backward. Time after time the knife of the unknown wonder cut through Dave's clothes, till they hung a mass of tatters about their owner's arms and body.

Suddenly a cry came from the lips of the would-be chief, and the next moment he made a sweeping stroke that left a red trail across his opponent's forehead.

He had drawn first blood!

Realizing he would soon be blinded by the blood that would run down into his eyes, the Shark fought with the fury of despair. But he was no match for the wearer of the mask, a thing which he began to realize.

"I might hev killed ye long ago," declared the unknown, and Dave did not dispute the assertion.

The blood began to trickle down over the outlaw's face, making it difficult for him to see. Several times he drew his tattered sleeve across his eyes to wipe it away, and each time the mask could have ended his life with a single stroke.

Slowly Dave fell back again. The knife of the unknown flashed and darted before his eyes in a manner that now filled him with terror. He realized the man was playing with him, and he began to fear a fatal thrust.

"Enough!" he finally cried—"I have enough!"

In a moment the strange duelist flung his knife to the floor, where it struck on the rocks with a ringing sound.

"Thet settles it," he said. "I am always ready to give a man quarter when he cries enough."

The outlaws stared at him in too great amazement to utter a word.

Of a sudden Black Rule began to gasp and gurgle, betraying the fact that he was not dead, although he had been unconscious for a time. But for several minutes he was too weak to arise.

"Are you ready now to accept me as your chief?" asked the unknown.

There was a moment of silence, then the Spaniard cried:

"Santissima! No! At everything you cannot be so skillful! I will meet you with swords."

A scornful laugh came from beneath the mask.

"You are ther hardest crowd ter satisfy I

ever struck," declared the strange duelist. "But I will meet nary one man with swords!"

"*Por Dios!* You dare not!"

"You never made er bigger error in yer life. I said I would not meet ary one man. 'Cause why? 'Cause thar hain't ary man hyer as is er match fer me. But ef you hev got two pairs of swords, I will meet ther *two* best men of your crowd!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNKNOWN BECOMES CHIEF.

THE masked man's words were greeted by exclamations of amazement from the Spaniard and his companions.

"I swar," growled Half-Hand Hugh, "he must think he hes fell inter a nest of babbys!"

"You know not what you say," sneered the Spaniard. "I am a skilled swordsman and more than your match alone."

"I don't reckon he means that he'll fight two of ther boys at once," observed another outlaw.

"That is exactly what I mean," calmly declared the strange man.

"Wal, you *are* er fool!" coarsely laughed the half-handed outlaw. "Your luck so fur hes made ye crazy. Pedro hyer is ther best swordsman in this kentry. I reckon he's ernough fer you."

"It is *you* who is the fool," asserted the mask. "Have I not given evidence that I know my business and know it thoroughly? I absolutely refuse to meet any one of your band in a sword contest; but if you will choose two of your best men and furnish us with the necessary weapons, I will meet them and defeat them."

"*Carajo!*" exclaimed the Spaniard, in derision. "This is too much! Let the fool's blood be on his own head. Bring on the swords."

In a few moments two bright pairs of shining blades were produced.

"One favor I will have," said the unknown, who had now quite abandoned his uncouth manner of speaking and appeared like a man of some education. "The choice of swords should be mine, for if by chance I should have a poor weapon and it should break in my hand, my goose would be cooked. Shall I choose?"

The outlaws did not object, and he selected two of the swords.

"Ah!" came from his lips, as he stood with the weapon in his hands. "There is another condition I had quite forgotten. It is that the best swordsman shall stand so that I shall engage him with my right hand. I will look out for the other fellow with my left."

This was agreed to without dissent.

Pedro, the Spaniard, threw aside his *serape* and selected one of the swords. One of the Sharks advanced and took up the other.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the Spaniard, as he cut the air with the keen blade in his hand. "This weapon will soon find a road to your heart, senor. Now you are doomed."

The mask scornfully echoed the laugh.

"I shall play with you as if you were a child," he asserted. "This whole affair is a grand jubilee for me. I have not struck another such a good time in months."

He placed his back against the cavern wall and announced himself ready for the attack. Without hesitation, the Spaniard and his companion advanced on the daring unknown. The outlaws crowded forward, every one eager to witness the most singular contest it had ever been their fortune to see.

The Spaniard did not hesitate to declare his intention of taking the unknown's life, and as Pedro's companion had also been his pupil in the art of fencing, it looked as if the duel would be a very unequal one.

But the man of the sable mask seemed quite undaunted by the peril his own apparently foolhardy proposal had brought upon him. Calmly he waited till his opponents were within reach, then four swords clashed.

At first it seemed Pedro's design to play with the man whom he intended for a victim and thus discover how much skill the unknown really possessed. But the Spaniard was soon piqued by the easy manner in which he was kept at bay, and he began to press the fighting more hotly.

But, as if in utter derision of Pedro's skill, the masked wonder seemed to watch his left hand opponent and almost disregard the Spaniard. It was a most wonderful thing that he could see them both well enough to keep them from running him through in a few seconds.

"By Heaven! he must be in league with ther devil!" muttered Half-Hand Hugh, as he stared at the wonderful duel. "He never looks at Pedro a tall, yit he keeps him off without seemin' ter much more'n hafe try! By Moses! I'm beginnin' ter be skeered of thet critter!"

And the Half-Hand was not alone in his fear of the unknown.

The Spaniard snarled out an oath as he saw with what disregard his attack was met, then he fairly hurled himself at the mask. Then, for the first time, the stranger seemed to look toward the furious swordsman.

"*Demonio Gringo!*" Pedro hissed. "You I will kill! Through your heart I will run my sword!"

"You are not built right," was the cool reply.

Clash! clash! Z-z-z! z-z-z! The swords hissed and rung in deadly music. Like serpents of silvery light they twisted and darted here and there, seeming to twine around each other and seek for a chance to bury their deadly points in a human heart. The spectators were held fascinated and breathless as by a magic spell.

Suddenly, by some secret and wonderful trickery, the masked duelist tore the weapon from his left-hand foe and sent it clashing against the rocky wall. Then he wheeled on the Spaniard and literally *charged*. Round Pedro's head darted and flashed the two swords in the hands of the wonderful unknown, and the Spaniard was forced to retreat, being dazed and appalled by a skill he had never dreamed mortal man possessed.

In a moment he felt a wrench and knew his sword had been snatched from his grasp. He expected to feel the blade of the unknown, but the strange man made no offer to strike him. Instead, he kept Pedro's sword dancing in the air like a thing of life, only seeming to touch it now and then with the blades he held in his hands. It was magic such as no man present had ever witnessed before, and their blood grew cold as they gazed.

Glittering, whirling and ringing, the bright blade danced upon the flashing swords clutched in the wizard duelist's hands. Finally, as it turned in the air, its point struck upon the flat side of the unknown's right hand weapon, and there it was balanced in a perpendicular position. Then he dropped every weapon and they fell to the floor with a clash leaving the man unarmed, as he once more calmly faced the Land Sharks, his arms folded across his breast.

For more than a minute there was absolute silence, then some one caught his breath in a gasp. That broke the spell, and Half-Hand Hugh hoarsely whispered:

"I wish I wuz in ary dad-burned place outside of Sheol besides this one! Ever' blamed drop of my blood's turned ter ice!"

Pedro, the defeated Spaniard, said not a word, but he turned and tried to sneak away into the darkness without being observed.

"Stop!" cried the unknown, sternly, his voice ringing commandingly through the chamber. "Come back here!"

Without speaking, the Spaniard obeyed.

"That is right," came from beneath the sable mask. "If you always obey as well, you and I will get along nicely. Have I not whipped the best men of your band in fair and even contest?"

"I reckon not," was the Half-Hand's reply.

The unknown turned on him like a flash.

"And why not?" he demanded, in a tone that actually made the ruffian turn pale.

"Because ther odds wuz ag'in' ye," was the reply.

"Well, then, have I not proven myself your master in any way, shape or manner? Speak up, every man."

And every man replied:

"You have."

"Then am I not fit to become your chief?"

"You are."

"And do you accept me as such?"

"We do," was the unanimous reply.

CHAPTER VII.

MET ON THE TRAIL.

It almost seemed as if the blind man had actually seen the face at the window, but Zoe knew that could not be possible. As she saw the man dodge back and disappear in the darkness, a cry sprung to her lips, but she repressed it with an effort.

"What is it, daddy?" she asked, catching her father's hand. "What do you mean? You frighten me!"

Blind Bent passed an arm over her shoulders and drew her close to him, while his left hand was pressed over his sightless eyes. For several moments he was silent, then he muttered, brokenly:

"It almost seemed—like I could—see. There was a face before me—the face of my dream. But, it is all black again—all black, all black! Oh, this cruel darkness!"

A shudder shook his strong form and his rugged face was expressive of the deepest anguish.

Zoe gazed toward the window, but the face did not re-appear from the darkness. She had simply caught a glimpse of it, and she knew she would not be able to recognize the person if she should meet him face to face in the broad light of day. But, for all of that, there had been something about that vanishing countenance that filled her heart with horror and fear. Although she fully understood it was impossible that her father had seen the man, it still seemed very strange that he should have called her attention to the spy in such a manner.

"I will not tell him," she thought. "He shall not know there was any one peering in at the window. It would do no good, and it would fill his troubled head with a thousand wild fancies. It may have been some mountain tramp who was passing the cabin, and was attracted by the light."

She pressed her father back toward the rude cot from which he had sprung.

"You are excited, daddy. Your dreams have unnerved you. You should lay down and try to get some rest."

"Rest!" he echoed. "What have I to do but rest and smoke? 'Tain't rest I need, little one—it's work, work, *work!* Here I am, a strong, well man, and I have to lay round doing nothing! I have always been used to work, and my whole body is running over with the strength and energy that I cannot use. *That* is what's the matter with me."

He sunk down helplessly on the cot, the picture of a strong man in distress. She tried to soothe him, and succeeded in a measure, something like a smile finally breaking across his face.

"You are my angel, Zoe!" he declared. "But for you— Well, I *won't* think of that! I expect I am selfish, but—"

"You selfish, daddy! Why, you dear old boy! You could not be selfish if you tried!"

"There, there! don't try your flattery on me, child! I am too old to swallow such stuff, and I reckon I know some of my own faults. Don't try to fool an old man, Zoe, you witch! He has lived a little, if his lead is pretty near run out now."

"'Tisn't flattery; it's honest. But if you will not let me say what I think, I'll never let you praise me again. What do you think of that?"

"Oh, you'll corner me some way—you always do. I'll have to give up to you, I suppose. It's plain you are a spoiled child. I reckon you'll find a way to be boss when Jack gets you."

"You don't mean that, daddy—I know you don't. I wouldn't give a cent for a man that hadn't any mind of his own. We will both be boss—Jack and I."

"Ah! I thought that would start you! Now, you're mad with your old dad. You've just backed off so you don't touch him, and I reckon those blue eyes of your mother's are looking reproachfully at him. Oh, but I didn't mean a thing, child!"

Zoe laughed.

"Of course you didn't, daddy. Wasn't that what I said? Mad—me mad with *you!* I shall believe you are going crazy if you keep on talking like that!"

It was Bent's turn to laugh.

"Oh, I fetched you! Now, you're creeping back to make up with the old man. You can't twist the old fool round your little finger, can't you? Well, he likes to be twisted; he doesn't ask for anything better."

"I don't know what has gotten into you to-night, daddy. You are *awful* changeable. I don't understand how to take you."

"Well, I understand how Jack'll take *you*. The parson will say 'for better or worse,' but it will be for better. That fellow says he has been knocking over the world in search for a fortune, but he has never found it. The ideal! If he hasn't found something better than a fortune, I don't know shucks!"

"Oh, you make me blush, daddy! You mustn't talk this way! Just think how I would feel if Jack was here!"

"But he isn't here. All the same, he is here enough of the time. I'm selfish enough to want you to myself a little bit of the time, but I don't get you much when he's around."

Thus they sat and talked for some time. Finally the girl induced him to lie down. She sat beside him and sung some of her sweetest songs, allowing her voice to sink lower and lower as his breathing seemed to indicate he was falling asleep. At length, he appeared wrapped fast in slumber, and her singing ceased.

"Poor, poor daddy!" she murmured, softly. "He has always been a good father to me. It was so dreadful that he should lose his sight! Sometimes when he takes on so about it, it makes a sharp pain in my heart. If he knew how it hurt me to hear him moan and cry out about his sight—if he knew— But, he doesn't know."

She glanced apprehensively toward the window at which she had seen the face.

"I wonder who it could have been? It was so strange that some one should have been peering in at the window when he sprung up with the declaration that he could see the face of his dream. And he pointed straight at the window, too—"

She paused suddenly, for it seemed as if the blind man had started slightly; but as she bent over her father, his regular breathing continued.

"He still sleeps. I am full of fancies to-night. I cannot forget the horrors of that terrible outlaws' cavern and the deception of the man I trusted. To think he had such a black heart! But, he is dead—he was justly punished. Jack is true. There is no deception in his face. He does not want me to go upon the stage as a singer. Those dreams are banished forever."

"Sleep on, daddy. The man who would have stolen your child from you is past doing further harm. He has gone before the great Judgment Bar of God to answer for his wickedness. We will soon go far, far from here, and with Jack and I you shall have a happy, peaceful home."

She bent over and kissed him softly.

"Good-night," she murmured—"good-night, daddy!"

She then lifted the lamp and glided silently from the room. Had she looked back as she

passed through the doorway, she would have made the discovery that her father was not asleep, for his sightless eyes were wide open and turned toward her, as if he were watching her out of the room.

Within her own room, she turned the light low down. She did not disrobe, for she wished to be ready to arise at any moment, if her father appeared restless.

She knelt by the side of her humble bed and, with bowed head, uttered a low prayer that came from the very depths of her innocent heart—a prayer for her father, for Jack and for herself.

When she lay down on the bed, she was unable to sleep for some time, as her thoughts were of the face she had seen at the window. But, after a time, her fancies drifted to different things. She was with Jack and they were married; they were living in a happy home far, far from the wild land where first they met; her father, peaceful and content, smoked in a corner by the fire-side. Then it seemed that strange music sounded in her ears—the merry laugh of children. There were two of them; they had climbed upon her father's knees and he was laughing with them. They called him grandfather!

She slept; but upon her face was a glad flush and a happy smile.

The blind man in the other room had lifted his head and listened. The time dragged slowly, but he was patient and his ears were strained to hear the slightest sound. At length, he arose and softly crossed the floor to the door of her room, where he paused to listen once more.

The regular breathing of one who is sleeping came to his ears. He nodded with satisfaction.

"That is what she needs," he softly whispered. "It is not rest that I need. They think it is, but it is not. I need work, work! But, the child is tired out with watching me. It almost seems as if I could not stir without bringing her to my side. I had to feign sleep in order to get her to leave me. But, she is resting now. God bless and protect you, Zoe, my child!"

He moved cautiously back from the door and found his way to the cot, upon which he lay down.

"She has taken the light away," he murmured. "I cannot feel it in the room. She spoke of some one who was looking in at the window. Who could have been there? I came near betraying that I was not asleep when she was speaking of that. My dream—it was a warning! I fear there is still trouble in store for us. Desperate Durg is beyond doing harm, but there are other devils to fill his place. Zoe's beauty will be her constant peril. Jack must aid me to guard her."

After a time, Bent himself uttered a simple prayer for his child's safety, and when the night was far spent, he fell asleep.

Morning came, and with daybreak the blind man and his child were astir. The return of day made them both feel more cheerful.

Their breakfast was a plain but wholesome meal, and, as both were feeling pleasant, it was made more palatable by laugh and jest.

"Your rest has done you lots of good, daddy," declared the girl. "If you keep on this way, we shall be able to start for the East in a few days."

"I see 'tain't any use for me to say a word about it," he smiled. "I have declared I was all ready to start any time, but I can't make you and Jack believe it."

"Oh, well, you may as well let us have our way."

"I don't see but I'll have to."

"Of course you will."

"Well, I never thought the time would come that I wouldn't be able to rule my own roost. I'm a regular back number now. If you ever have any children, I just won't be anywhere."

Zoe blushed as she thought of her dream.

"You don't mean that, daddy!" she protested. "You'd be the king of the household then. But, that's looking a long way ahead."

"That's so," he nodded, gravely. "But, I don't reckon it will be long. Time is just rushing, and I am beginning to realize it more than ever. It doesn't seem but a short time ago that your mother and I were married, and now you are 'most big enough to be married. That's the way it goes."

She found he was growing sad again, and she hastened to cheer him with merry words and an airy song. He lighted his pipe and smoked, as she sung about her work.

When everything was cleared away and the dishes were washed, she expressed a desire to go out into the sunshine, and asked him to go with her. But he protested that he had rather sit in front of the cabin and smoke than to go stumbling along like a lame horse that was being led.

"Well, I will not go far, daddy. I will just take a walk down the trail a piece."

"And I will wait here till you come back. If you do not go far, there will be little danger of meeting enemies."

She laughed at this.

"Enemies, daddy—I have no enemies in all the wide world now."

"I hope not, child—I hope not."

So she kissed him and danced lightly away,

singing as merrily as a bird. He listened till her voice had died in the distance, holding his pipe suspended and allowing it to go out. When he could no longer hear her, he uttered a deep sigh and fumbled in his pocket for a match.

Zoe wandered quite a distance down the trail, and finally sat down on a boulder by the roadside. Another huge stone rose close beside her, and she was thinking how completely any one could conceal themselves behind it, when she observed an advancing figure coming from the direction of Jericho.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed. "That looks like Jack—it is Jack!"

A sudden resolve came over her.

"He has seen daddy and been told I am down this way. I will conceal myself until he passes, then surprise him by appearing behind him."

Then she hastened to get behind the huge boulder. As she did so, she happened to glance along the trail from the mining-camp and was surprised to see a female leisurely approaching.

"I wonder who that can be?" thought Zoe, as she watched the advancing woman. "It must be some new arrival in Jericho, and she has wandered out this way for a walk."

As the woman came nearer, Zoe saw she was expensively and fashionably attired. The girl gazed at her in wonder. From her position she could not see Jack Howard, but the young man and the strange woman came face to face directly in front of the boulder by the wayside!

Jack gave utterance to an exclamation indicative of surprise, as his eyes fell fairly on the face of the woman he had met. Zoe could plainly see him then, and she observed that his face turned pale.

As Jack uttered the exclamation, the woman gazed inquiringly at him; then, with a low cry, she started forward, her hands outstretched.

"Harree!" she almost shrieked.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT ZOE OVERHEARD.

JACK HOWARD threw up his hand with a gesture that could not be mistaken. It plainly expressed repulsion.

"Stop!" he cried, sternly.

The woman halted in dismay, wonder written on her face and inquiry flashing from her dark eyes.

"Do not you know me, Harree?" she asked, her musical voice having an accent that plainly indicated her nationality as French. "It cannot be zat you haf forgot me?"

"I have not forgotten you," he replied, bitterly. "I wish to God I might!"

Her dark eyes opened wide with evident wonder.

"What can eet be zat you mean?" she cried.

"Just what I said."

"But, I am Antoinette."

"A beautiful fiend!"

"What ees zat, Harree? Feend? What you mean by zat?"

He did not reply. For a moment he half-turned, as if to retrace his steps without further words; then he suddenly wheeled toward her, his eyes blazing.

"Woman," he exclaimed, "why are you here?"

She fell back a step, as if she had received a blow in the face.

"Oh, Harree!" she murmured.

With two strides he was at her side and had clutched her gloved wrist.

"Answer my question!" he almost hissed.

"Why are you here?"

She uttered a little cry of pain.

"You hurt my wrist, monsieur! Eet is rude of you. You do frighten me."

"Will you answer?"

"I am lookeng for you—I look ev'rywhere. I find you at ze las'."

He released her wrist and fell back a step, a look of scorn on his face.

"Looking for me!" he echoed. "Oh, no! I do not swallow that! I am older than when you saw me last, Antoinette."

"And handsomer, Harree!"

The frown deepened on his face.

"That will do! I am no longer a boy to be deceived by your flattering tongue. You played your game once, and I was the sucker you caught. But, I found you out in the end, and I closed the infamous career of your murderous accomplice."

A look of sadness settled on her face.

"You are wrong—vera wrong," she declared.

"I haf no ac-ac-accompleese. You haf been deceive'."

"Don't!" exclaimed Jack. "I do not wish to be rude enough to tell you you lie, but I am strongly tempted when I hear you distorting the truth in such a manner. You may as well be honest with me. What has brought you to America? It must be you are at a game of some kind."

She shook her head.

"I know not what you mean. Game? What you mean by zat?"

"As if you did not know. You have been in a game of some kind since your adventurous career in Paris began. You have been the cause of the death of many a poor fool who

raised a row when he found himself robbed of his money. You lured the victims into the trap baited by your smiles, and when they were sucked dry, you cast them aside like worthless things. Then, if they made trouble, your accomplice silenced them."

A look of pain and distress marked the French siren's changeable face.

"Who tell you zis?" she cried, excitedly. "Eet is not true! To you zey do tell one lie! Oh, Harree, Harree! zat you should believe zis of me! I love you in ze past, and—"

"Stop!" he fairly thundered, his face growing black with passion. "Do you dare speak thus to me? Love! Great God! Your love was like that of a treacherous serpent! Your love was the love of gold! Gold was your God! You cared not how you obtained it—not even when it cost human life! You seemed a thing of passion, but you had a heart of ice! Your voluptuousness was the ruin of many a good man! It nearly led me to my death, and it *did* leave me with my hands stained with the blood of your guilty accomplice."

She shrunk and covered before him. In his passion, he seemed like an accusing god!

The girl behind the boulder was thrilled and held spellbound. She could neither stir nor utter a sound. With dilated eyes she watched the strange scene.

The Frenchwoman began to sob, producing a snowy handkerchief and burying her face in it.

"Oh, Harree!" she moaned. "You do frighten me! Nevar, nevar was I what you say! Eet may be true zat I flirt, but I am always true to you. When I hear zat you go to fight ze duel wiz Monsieur Warwick, I am vera near dead wiz ze dretful terror. I weep and weep and weep, for I know heem to be one bad man. I eexpect to hear you are dead, but I hear something else—"

"Yes; I ran my sword through the dastard's body and left him dying on the spot where he fell."

Antoinette dried her tears somewhat, clasping her hands, as she declared:

"When zat I do hear, I nearly faint wiz ze joy. Zen I wait for you to come, but you nevar come."

"No. I learned the truth—I knew you for what you were. As soon as possible, I shook the dust of France from my feet."

"Zat was crueel! I wait and wait, while my heart it haf a great pain. Oh, Harree! zey do deceive you! I am always true to you!"

"That will do! You are still a superb actress, Antoinette; but you cannot play on my feelings now as you did in the past. I care nothing for you. You are as the dust under my feet!"

His scorn seemed to cut her keenly, for her face was very pale and she trembled visibly. Still she was not ready to give up defeated.

"I can prove to you zat I speak ze trute, Monsieur Weelson. You will haf to believe eef I can prove."

"I will believe in nothing that emanates from you. But, let me tell you more: If you could convince me every word you have spoken is true, you would still be nothing to me. My passion for you was the passion of a hot-blooded boy. It was not the passion of a pure and manly love. You reciprocated with what appeared to be a similar emotion. In my heart you aroused a flame that would soon have burned itself out from its own intensity. But, since those foolish days I have met another—one pure as the angels above!—and she has found a place in my heart never reached before."

A hot flush of flame spread over Antoinette's face and her eyes flashed. For a moment she showed her white teeth like some angered animal.

"Ah! zat is eet!" she hissed, her small hands clinched. "Now I know ze trute! I haf a rival who haf driven me out of your heart! Ah-a! I will learn who she ees—she shall know ev'ryting! Zen, Monsieur Weelson, do you tink you weel keep her vera long?"

He took one step forward, his hands clinched and his aspect ominous. She faced him without flinching, triumph marked on her smiling face.

"Strike eef you weel!" she cried. "I am not afraid of you! You I haf had at my feet. You s'all come zere again!"

"Never!"

"You s'all!"

"You are simply winning my further scorn and hatred. You can never hope I will care for you again."

"Eef you do not care for me, you s'all come to my feet to beg for ze one you do care for."

His fury was indescribable.

"Oh!" he cried, in despair; "you are a woman! If you were only a man!"

"What zen?"

"I would kill you!"

She smiled her defiance.

"But, I am not a man, so ze monsieur is at one disadvantage. I haf ze best of zis."

"I will not remain here longer!" broke from his white lips. "I dare not remain! Woman, for God's sake keep clear of my path! If you dare to contaminate the fair flower I love—if you dare to contaminate her by speaking to her—"

"What?"

He did not trust himself to words; he made a savage gesture, dashed past her and hurried onward along the trail.

CHAPTER IX.

ANTOINETTE PLAYS A HIGH CARD.

WITH clinched hands, backward-thrown head and white, set teeth gleaming between her parted lips, the French siren stood staring after the receding form of the man. She did not alter her position till he was out of sight beyond the bend, then she leaned forward, throwing out one clinched fist, hissing:

"Go, go, go! Eet is *comme il faut*! You do no longer care for me, eh? Well, here I do come to ruin you, and zat I will do!"

Till this moment Little Zoe had remained spell-bound by what she had seen and heard. Now she started out from behind the boulder, and almost before she was aware what she was doing, she had reached Antoinette's side and caught her arm.

"What—what is he to you?" gasped the song-bird of the mountain camp.

The Frenchwoman fell back in astonishment. "Eet is a child!" she exclaimed, gazing down at the white upturned face.

"What is he to you?" repeated Zoe, shaking the arm she grasped. "Tell me—tell me the truth!"

"Tell you ze trute? Why should you be so vera interested?"

The yellow-haired girl fairly panted with excitement.

"I must know—I must know all about Jack! If he, too, has been deceiving me—Heavenly Father! what shall I do?"

Antoinette appeared doubly astounded and perplexed.

"Eet cannot be," she muttered, shaking her head. "Not'ing but a child! Zis ees not ze one."

Zoe began to sob with the intensity of her emotion.

"Why don't you tell me?" she cried.

"My dear leetle girl," said Antoinette. "I do not understan' what you weesh to know."

"It is about Jack. I was behind the rock there, and I saw and heard it all. Now—"

"Jack—who ees Jack?"

"He has just left you."

"Zat? Zat was Monsieur Harree Weelson."

"That was Jack Howard."

"Ah! So he may be known here, but een Paree he was Monsieur Weelson. But, what can zat man be to you? You tell me zat, zen I weel tell you what he is to me."

Zoe hesitated; then, with desperation, she replied:

"He is *everything* to me!"

"But, eet cannot be zat you are ze one he do love?"

"I have promised to marry him."

"You are not'ing but a child! Has he been bad enough to deceive you in zis way?"

"He has won my love."

"Zen he ees one greater rascal zan I thought! Eef you was oldare eet would not seem so vera bad; but to take not'ing but a child—zat ees wicked!"

Antoinette looked very indignant.

Zoe's feelings overcame her, and she began to sob hysterically and wring her hands. The Frenchwoman made a pretense of soothing her, but when the girl did not see, she smiled with the joy of a female fiend.

"Come here and sit down on zis stone," entreated Antoinette, leading Zoe to the rock where she had first rested beside the trail. "I want you to tell me all about eet."

She crouched beside a boulder, her arm about the innocent girl's waist, her eyes devouring the song-bird's fair face.

"You are prit-tee," she admitted. "I don't know as you are beautiful, but you are prit-tee. You do not know vera much of ze ways of ze worl'. Oh, you are so easy to be deceive! Zat man ees bad, bad!"

"And I trusted him—he seemed so noble and true."

"Zat ees ze way wiz zem zat deceive ze most. Zey haf ze way of seeming honorable. Oh, him I do know! Did he not win my love? Zen he desert me."

"Where was that?"

"In Paree. I meet heem zere—I fall een love wiz heem. He seem to love me, and he promise to marra me. I love heem so much I would do anything for heem—I would lay down my life! Zen I hear zat he tell stories of me. One of my old lovars he hear of ze stories, and he challenge Monsieur Weelson to fight ze duel. Zen I did not beelieve zat Harree tell ze stories. I feel dreadful when I hear of ze duel, but I was not able to stop eet. I tink Monsieur Weelson be kill, for my old lovar be expert wiz ze sword. I wait to hear ze news, and eef he is kill, I tink I will kill myself. I hear zat he run his sword t'rough my old lovar's body and kill heem. Zen I wait for Harree, but Harree nevar come. He desert me, and he haf promise to marra me. Oh! I vera near kill myself in ze rivar!"

Antoinette dropped her face in her hands, apparently quite overcome by the bitter recollections her story had brought. Her willowy body shook with something that seemed much like

grief, or terror at the remembrance. After a time she continued:

"I could not believe he haf desert me; I tink he go from ze country so he will not be arrested for ze result of ze duel. When zey tell me of ze stories he speak of me, I will not listen. I steel love him wiz all my heart—I love heem more zan my life! I tink I will follow heem. Zat I do, and I go ev'rywhere, and not find heem till I come here. You see me when I find heem. You know how he meet me. Now, for ze first time, I believe zat he tell ze stories about me. I begin to understan' what vera bad man he ees."

"And so do I!" cried the listening girl. "Oh, is there none who are good and true in all the wide world? I fear not. None—none but my poor blind old daddy!"

"Oh, yes, child! zere are zem who are true—zere are zem who are good. But, Monsieur Weelson ees not one of zem. You say he haf deceive you. He haf not deceive you one-half as he haf me. He was all I haf in ze whole wide worl', and he desert me! You say you haf a father."

"Yes, but he is blind."

"Ze blind are ze truest. He will nevar desert you."

"No, no; daddy would lay down his life for me!"

"I know eet."

"But, it will quite crush him when I tell him of my terrible discovery. He believes in Jack."

"He will haf more care zan to let you marra zat wicked man!"

"Yes, yes!"

"Zen you are safe."

"I am not so sure of that. Oh, how I shall dread to meet Jack again! I cannot meet him—I cannot!"

"You poor leetle dear! You are not fit to fight ze battle wiz ze worl'. I will be a friend to you."

What was it that made the mountain song-bird start as if in fear? She turned her eyes searchingly on Antoinette. The French siren smiled—what craft there was in that smile! Yet her eyes met Zoe's frankly, and her face was transformed to one of absolute beauty. Hours of posing and practice before a mirror had given her control of that one look that won the friendship of women and the admiration of men.

Suddenly Zoe sprung up, as if in terror.

"I must not remain here longer!" she cried. "Jack—he has gone up the trail, and he may return any time! I must go before he comes to see me. I cannot, cannot meet him now!"

Antoinette arose.

"You poor dear!" she said. "Eet is dretful to be so afraid of a man!"

Together they went back along the trail toward Zoe's humble cabin home.

CHAPTER X.

OLD PLUG UGLY SWEARS ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP.

TOM BENT was still sitting in front of the cabin, smoking his black pipe, when Zoe and Antoinette approached.

"That is my father," explained the mountain song-bird. "Will you come and tell him what you have told me?"

But the Frenchwoman was disinclined.

"I have not ze time, my dear," was her reply. "I mus' return to ze place what zey call ze hotel. Some time will I come to see you and your faze; now I cannot."

Zoe found it impossible to induce her to stop and relate the story to the blind man.

"You tell heem ev'ry'ting; some time I come and tell heem more. I weel see you again on ze to-morrow. *Au revoir, ma chere.*"

Zoe stood and watched her as she glided gracefully away toward the camp. There was a bitter pain in the little singer's heart and her usually merry face seemed very sad.

"If I had never known!" she murmured—"oh, if I had never known! Perhaps it would have been all right—perhaps Jack is changed. That woman came to take from me the greatest happiness of my life. She is strange. I know not if I like her. One moment I fear her, and the next she wins me with that smile."

She pressed her small brown hands together convulsively and began to sob again.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" fell from her trembling lips. "It is so hard that you should be false and bad like the others! And you have such a frank face! I wish it might prove false—I wish I could believe it all a deception! But, what did I hear as I crouched behind that boulder? I cannot remember half, but I do remember enough to know that Jack has been something to this woman in the past. He was so furious he frightened me. Never before have I seen him that way. When he grasped her by the wrist I came near fainting with terror. And he said he would kill her if she were a man! Oh, Jack! you have—"

Her father's voice interrupted her:

"Is that you, child? I can hear you. You are talking to some one. Who is it?"

She turned and walked slowly toward the blind man.

"How can I tell him?" she whispered—"how can I? He will be furious, I fear. But, he must know the truth!"

He looked at her with a steady gaze. "You are talking to some one. Who is it?"

"Is that you, child? I can hear you. You are talking to some one. Who is it?"

She turned and walked slowly toward the blind man.

"How can I tell him?" she whispered—"how can I? He will be furious, I fear. But, he must know the truth!"

"So you have returned from your walk, have ye?" smiled Bent. "Oh! you needn't keep still! I heard your voice. If I can't see, my old ears reach out as well as ever. And I would recognize your footstep anywhere."

"Yes, I am back, daddy."

A queer look passed over his face, as if he had recognized something unusual in her voice, but he continued:

"And did you find the sun bright as usual and the birds as merry? I've heard the little rascals chirping around. I don't believe you have thrown out any crumbs for them this morning. You must have forgotten them."

She knelt down by his side and laid her head in his lap. His rough hands began to gently caress her yellow hair.

"Did you meet any one up the trail?" he asked. "There was a person here to see you. I said you'd gone out for a walk in the sunshine. Did he—?"

The blind man stopped suddenly, for his fingers had touched a tear that still clung to her cheek. He looked amazed.

"What's this?" he exclaimed, swiftly passing his hands over her face and finding her cheeks damp. "It can't be you have been crying this bright morning—it *can't* be! What could be the cause of it? Was it Jack?—have you quarrelled with Jack so quick? Now, I can't hardly believe that! But what does this mean? Has he—?"

At this point Zoe covered her face with her hands and burst into tears once more. Bent paused in astonishment.

"Now, I'd just like to understand *this*!" he finally cried. "You went away as happy as a lark, and you came back crying. If that young rascal don't know enough to treat you right before you are tied to him, how will it be afterward?"

"I shall never marry Jack!" sobbed the girl—"never, never!"

"And so it's just as I thought, is it?" nodded Blind Tom. "You two have been quarreling. Well, well, well! That is beginning a trifle early!"

"No, it is not that; I have not spoken to Jack this morning."

The blind man uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Then what in the name of the great General Scott can the matter be? I am completely flabbergasted! Tell me, little one, what is the trouble?"

For a time her sobs choked her so she could not explain, but at length she began her story. In a broken way she told him what she had seen and heard as she crouched behind the great boulder by the side of the trail. For some reason she had so understood the words which passed between Jack and Antoinette that they placed the young man in a very bad light. Then she related what the Frenchwoman had told her.

Bent repressed his amazement and anger as well as possible, only interrupting her once or twice during the narration; but he was fairly boiling within. When Zoe had finished, he said:

"Now, you hold up a bit, child! It's just possible this case isn't more'n half as bad as you think. Perhaps you have got things just a bit twisted—with the aid of the Frenchwoman. It may be possible that woman didn't tell you the whole truth. We'll have to hear what Jack has to say for himself."

At this Zoe sprung up in terror.

"No, no!" she cried. "I do not want to see him—I dare not!"

"Well, I will see him—that is, I'll have a talk with the lad. I'll tell him what is charged against him, and give him a chance to clear himself. If he can't do that—"

"He is coming, daddy! I will go into the cabin, but as you love me do not let him follow! I can not see him to-day!"

She hurried into the cabin.

Jack Howard had seen her, and he came rapidly forward. As he heard the sound of approaching footsteps, Blind Bent arose and placed his massive form in front of the door.

"Is that you, Jack Howard?" he asked.

"Yes, it is I," was the reply. "Good-morning, Mr. Bent."

"Is it a good morning? Well, I will allow it seems like a powerful bad morning to me."

Jack was amazed.

"The old fellow is out of his head again," was the young man's thought.

"But, the sun is shining brightly," he said aloud; "and the very air is like wine. I call it a glorious morning."

Bent only grunted.

"Where is Zoe?" asked Jack. "I saw her go into the cabin."

"I reckon you did."

"I would like to see her."

"Well, you can't."

Jack's amazement increased.

"Why can't I?"

"For pretty good reasons—she don't want to see ye, and I don't want her to, either."

His words were like a blow in the face. The young man turned very pale.

"What are your reasons?" he finally asked.

"The best in the world. If what we have heard about you is true, you are not fit for my child to wipe her feet upon!"

Jack made a desperate gesture.

"And so," he cried, "Antoinette has been here with her lying tongue! She has filled your ears with falsehoods, and you have been ready to believe! Oh, the craft of that Parisian sorceress! Once again she has crossed my path, and it is plain she means to wreck my life!"

"She is a woman," fell soberly from the blind man's lips.

"A fiend in that guise!" The Evil One himself could not be more crafty! I know not what lies she may have told you, but it is plain she has placed me in a false light. She has deceived you, as she deceives every one with whom she has anything to do. She deceived me in the past, but I know her now for what she is. But, what has she told you?"

Briefly Bent explained what Zoe had overheard and what the Frenchwoman had afterward told her. Jack listened impatiently, restraining his temper with difficulty. When the blind man had finished, he cried:

"The woman lied to Zoe!"

"But, what about that which Zoe overheard? How will you explain it, lad?"

"It is plain she misunderstood some things which passed between us. I was nothing but a boy when I fell beneath this woman's influence. She ensnared and robbed me, aided by a gambler accomplice. I was forced into a duel with the man, and, as he was an expert swordsman, he intended to kill me, thus putting me out of the way forever. But, Fortune favored me, and he was the one who fell. Then I learned the truth concerning the woman who had entangled me in what came near being a death-trap. I left France, and I hoped never again to look upon the face of the siren who had so nearly destroyed me. Fortune has cast her across my path, and when she fails in her attempt to make me her dupe once more, she swears to ruin me. She has begun her foul work, and you believe in her. But, she shall yet be shown to you in her true light, and then—"

"And then, lad, if what you say is true, Zoe will be the same to you as before. I hope you may be able to prove what you said is true; but till then, my child is nothing to you."

"I will not be defeated! Zoe has acknowledged she loves me, and she shall be mine!"

Then the young man wheeled and walked swiftly away toward the camp. With bowed head the blind man stood listening by the door till the sound of Jack's footfalls died out in the distance.

Almost the first person Jack met on entering the camp was Old Plug Ugly.

"Hello, lad!" greeted the veteran. "What has run crossways with ye now! Your face looks ez black ez a thunder-cloud. Is it trouble, lad? Ef so, jest giv ther ole man ther pints, fer he is standin' in with ye through thick an' thin. You kin count on him—ev'ry time!"

Jack grasped the old miner's extended hand.

"I feel like unbosoming myself to some one," he confessed; "and you are the very man I would select above all others."

"Thankee, lad, thankee! Excuse this blush o' mine! It's natteral. Jest set yer jaw ter waggin'; my ears are open wide an' my heart's bubblin' over with sympathy. Ef thar's ter be war, count me in with all my artillery. I'll be thar!"

Jack led the way into the Metropolitan Saloon, where they could obtain seats.

"Now, fire away," said Plug, when they were comfortably settled.

The young man began at the beginning, telling of his first meeting with Antoinette in Paris and all that followed. The aged miner listened with intense interest, now and then interrupting the narrator with forcible exclamations or by striking the table with his clinched fist. When Jack told of the result of the duel, the veteran gave vent to a shout of delight that nearly raised the roof.

"Good boy!" he cried, delightedly. "Thet wuz ther time you done ther business! Oh, holy smoke! how thet galoot got left! Wish I'd bin thar, b'gosh!"

As Jack continued, the old miner's astonishment was plainly written on his homely face.

"An' so thet gal with ther honey-dew smile as kem in on ther stage yesterday is ther same female critter? Waal, waal! I sw'ar, things are gettin' humped inter a heap! An' she hes jest nacherly raised roots atwixt you an' ther leetle singer! Kicked up a thunderin' ole bobbery, hes she? Waal, she needs ter be sot down on hard! Thar are squalls in ther air; I kin sniff ther smoke o' battle."

At that moment Four Ace Frank sauntered through the room, apparently without noticing Old Plug or Jack.

"Thar!" hissed the veteran miner—"thar goes er critter as you've got ter keep yer eyes peeled fer—you heur me! He jest giv hisself plum' away ter me yisterday. Got his peepers onter Leetle Buttercup, an' wuz clean gone ter oncet. Axed 'bout her, an' w'en I told him she was same as hitched, he 'lowed he'd be able ter work er leetle racket thet'd leave ther galoot she wuz tied ter clean in ther cold. Oh, he meant biz!"

"It almost seems as if I had met that man before coming to Jericho," muttered Jack; "but where, or when I cannot say. Let him keep clear of my path!"

"I tell ye, lad, you're goin' ter hev hot work ahead o' ye. Thar are leap plenty of enemies layin' fer ye, an' yer frien's hain't ez thick ez they might be."

"But, you, Plug—I can depend on you!"

"Ez long ez I hev breath, boy! I kinder take ter ye, an' w'en I take ter a galoot, I'm his fer keeps. I will fight fer you an' Leetle Buttercup ter ther las' gasp. I am a frien' w'at you kin depen' on, bet yer shirt!"

The two clasped hands over the table.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BAD MAN AND OLD PLUG.

"WHOO!" squealed the voice of a newcomer in the saloon. "Cl'ar ther track, ye common critters! Git out of ther way fer ther howlin' horror from Hell Hole! Ef I bunt up ergin' ye, it'll seem like ye wuz struck by er cyclone! I'm out after skelps, and thar's gore—red, red gore in me eye!"

It was a fiery-headed little fellow, who called himself Bad Man Bob. He pranced into the saloon, a heavy revolver in either hand.

"I'm jest gittin' up steam," he asserted. "By ter-night I'll be on it, an' then I reckon I'll jest hev ter take ther town. Ef ther people of this yere measly leetle rat's nest know w'en they're well off, they'll batten up their doors an' hide under their bunks. Thar's ap' ter be blood—crimson blood—spilled afore I git cooled off."

Old Plug Ugly gave a snort of disgust.

"Now looker thet critter!" he exclaimed. "He thinks he's raisin' partic'lar hallelujah. Prob'ly he thinks ther hull camp is skeered o' him. I'll bet a hoss he'd faint ef some cuss sh'd chuck a gun under his nose an' invite him ter say his pra'rs."

"I never struck sech a Sunday-go-to-meetin' town," blustered the "Bad Man." "Fun! Thar hain't ary bit of fun in it; an' ther likker's wuss'n crick-water! Set us out some of yer hog-wash, barkeep!"

"Show the color of your cash first," said the barkeeper, quietly.

The red-head looked amazed.

"What's thet?" he howled. "Do you mean ter insult me, young man? Cash! Hash! Hain't my credic good hyer? Now, be keeful 'bout yer reply, fer I am liable ter take er notion ter shoot."

"We don't do a credit business."

"Oh, thet's it!" said the little man, with surprising mildness. "I didn't know thet. Ter be course, I w'dn't want ye ter break any of yer rules, but—"

At this point one of the Bad Man's revolvers apparently went off by accident, and the owner of the weapon seemed the most surprised of any one in the saloon. With a yell, he leaped three feet into the air, his hat flying off and his hair seeming to fairly bristle with terror. The instant his feet touched the floor, he whirled round and round, howling:

"Whar is he—whar's ther cuss as tried ter shoot me in ther back? Howlin' Hottentotts! Am I ter be 'sassinated like er Digger Injun? Am I ter stan' up an' be shot down without hev'n' ary show fer my life? Oh, great jizzlin' jeeswax! Is thet ther way ye do business in this yere town? Ef it is, I jest want some galoot ter show me ther road ter ther suburbs."

"Oh, board up thet hoel in yer face!" cried Old Plug Ugly.

Bad Man Bob gasped with astonishment, as he stood still and glared at the veteran miner, his entire aspect being most ridiculous. Finally, showing his teeth in a manner that was plainly intended to be very savage, he snarled:

"Did you say thet?"

"Now you've hit it fu'st pop," nodded Plug.

"I'm ther very galoot w'at made ther remark." Without stopping to pick up his hat, the Bad Man advanced toward the old miner, his revolvers still grasped in his hands and a dangerous light gleaming from his eyes. Three feet from the miner he halted, thrusting out his under jaw, as he exposed his teeth once more.

"I'd a good min' ter chaw ye up!" he growled.

"Waal, now, you'd fine me ther toughest chawin' you ever tackled."

"I've swallered bigger men then you!"

"Sho!"

"Fac'!"

"You skeer me!"

"Wal, ef you'll set up ther drinks, I'll agree not ter hurt ye."

"Thet's kind o' you!"

"Will ye set 'em up?"

"I'll think erbout it."

"Wal, you think mighty suddin' like, fer I'm powerful dry. I'm ez dry ez er desert, an' w'en I'm dry, I'm ugly. Look at me eye."

"Reg'lar fish-eye," commented Plug.

"Do you mean thet fer an insult?" howled the red-head, beginning to dance around in excitement. "It's plain I've got ter 'sassinate ye."

The old miner's disgust increased.

"Oh, go tell yer mammy ter spank ye!" he cried.

"Wha-wha-what!" gurgled the Bad Man. "Do you durst sling yer jaw in thet way w'en

I'm around! Howlin' Hottentotts! Thet duz git me r'iled! Now, I will hev ter lift yer ha'r! Whoop! I'm a wolf!"

"I'm mighty glad ye tole us," grinned Plug. "But fer thet, we'd tuck ye fer er flannel-jawed jackass."

Bad Man Bob's revolvers were self-cockers, and in his excitement he probably pulled harder on the triggers than he realized, for once more one of them spoke, the bullet being buried in the floor close to the toe of the red-headed fellow's right foot.

"Wow!" he squawked, again vaulting into the air and rolling his eyes in terror as he tried to look behind him. "Thet hain't fair! This shootin' at a man w'en he hain't lookin' is played out! Guv a man er show, thet's w'at I say!"

He gazed all around the room, as if in search for the person who fired the shot, then a sudden look of intelligence settled on his face, and he once more turned toward Jack Howard and the old miner.

"Looker hyer," he said, deliberately lifting one of his revolvers and covering Plug Ugly, "this shooting at a man from yer pocket's gittin' thin. Thet game is played out in Hell Hole, an' ther critter gits lynched as tries it. This is twicet you hev pumped lead at me in thet way, an' now I reckon I'll hev ter blow ther hull top side of yer head off."

"Dad-burn a fool!" snorted the old miner, springing up and thrusting the muzzle of the threatening weapon aside, at the same time catching the Bad Man by the collar. "You'd oughter be putt under a guarden ur you will shoot su'thin yit. Reckon I'll hev ter guv ye w'at ye need, an' thet's er good spankin' thet'll make ye think o' yer mammy."

He wrested the red-head's weapons from his fingers and then laid the little fire-eater kicking and squealing across his lap. In another moment Plug's stubbed right hand was administering the spanking he "reckoned" the Bad Man needed.

It was a comical sight, and both the barkeeper and Jack Howard were convulsed with laughter. Old Plug was as grave as a judge, while the unfortunate man from Hell Hole kicked and squirmed in a vain endeavor to break free.

When he finished administering the chastisement, Plug grasped the little man by the collar and stood him on his feet, after giving him a shake "ter git out ther kinks," as he explained.

"Now you git!" advised the veteran. "I'll leave your shooters hyer with ther barkeep, an' you kin git 'em w'en you are cooled off. Jest now it w'dn't be safe ter let ye hev 'em."

With both hands pressed on that part of his anatomy that had received the spanking, the discomfited red-head backed slowly away, his eyes fastened steadily on Old Plug Ugly, apparently being filled with astonishment, as well as various other emotions.

When about half-way across the floor, he suddenly turned, uttered a yell and dashed out at the open doorway, leaving those within the saloon still laughing, the old miner having joined in the merriment.

"Thet's ther way with ther most o' these yere bad men," nodded Plug. "Ther very thing they need most is er good ole-fashioned spankin'."

"I don't believe that fellow will be able to sit down with comfort for a week," observed the barkeeper.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAND SHARKS AT WORK.

NIGHT again.

From Blind Bent's cabin window a ray of light shot into the darkness.

Within the cabin Zoe and her father made a picturesque and touching tableau.

The girl was stretched at full length upon Blind Tom's bed, her face crushed down upon her arms and her yellow curls lying in a tangled mass about her head and shoulders. Her posture was one of grief and despair.

The blind man was bending over her, his horny hands gently touching her silken tresses.

"Come, come, little one!" he softly entreated. "You are not going to give way like this. Why, child! you have not eaten a bite since morning and you have not stirred for hours! This won't do, Zoe—no, no! this won't do!"

She did not stir. Only her breathing told she was alive.

"It is dreadful rough on your old daddy to have you this way," the blind man continued. "I reckon I'll just go plumb crazy if you don't move pretty soon! You don't seem to think of me. I can't stand it, little one!"

At this she stirred slightly. At last he had touched the right chord to arouse her. He realized this, and added:

"I haven't eaten anything either—how could I with you like this! And I don't reckon I am very well, if what the doctor said is true. It—"

She moved again and slowly lifted her head. The lamplight fell upon a face that was little short of ghastly, such were the traces of suffering left upon it in a few short hours. She was one of those unfortunate human beings on whom joy and sorrow have the most wonderful effect.

When happy she enjoyed life as few can; but when sorrow came, it crushed and tore her very soul.

"Don't daddy!" came hoarsely from her white lips—"please don't! Your words hurt me so!"

He caught her in his strong arms and held her close to his heart, as if he would never let her go again, while he murmured, brokenly:

"Oh, my precious—my life—my eyes! I did not mean to hurt you, little one! Forgive your old daddy, Zoe—forgive him!"

She threw back her head, her hair streaming down her back, and gazed straight into his sightless orbs.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" patting his bearded cheeks with her cold fingers. "I know you did not mean to hurt me, daddy! But, I was thoughtless—I forgot you. I will try not to think any more now. I will get you something to eat."

"And you will eat, too?" eagerly.

"I can't now, daddy; it would choke me."

"Then I can't eat."

For a moment she knew not what to do, but, with a sudden thought, she said:

"I will try to eat a little."

He kissed her and reluctantly released her. Had he not been blind, he would have seen her stagger as she left him. She felt as if all her strength had deserted her, but she bravely set about getting something for her father to eat.

When the food was ready, she spoke to him, and they sat down to the rude table. The blind man asked grace, as was his custom.

"Now you must eat, Zoe," he said.

"I will try."

She did try, but it was with the utmost difficulty she swallowed a morsel. Still she told him she had eaten, and so he partook of some of the food. But, it was a most dismal meal.

"I am not very hungry," Bent confessed; "but I could not bear to have you lying there so still and rigid. It gave me the horrors. I felt I must get you to stir or I should go daft."

When he had moved back to his corner, she came and filled his pipe. He took it from her hand, and began to talk between whiffs, endeavoring to be as cheerful as possible.

Zoe cleared away the table, then came and sat down beside him, letting her head fall on his shoulder.

"Daddy."

"What, Zoe?"

"I want you to sing."

"What shall I sing, little one?"

"That piece you used to sing when I was a wee little thing—you remember it? Many a time you have sung me to sleep."

"Yes, yes; I remember!" and the man's voice was a little husky. "It has been years since I have sung it, child; I almost doubt if I remember it."

"Well, try it, please."

After a few moments, he began the song. It was a simple old-fashioned lullaby, but Bent had a musical voice, and he made the piece very expressive. So, with Zoe's head on his shoulder, he kept singing it over and over, at her request. After a time, he stopped and spoke to her softly. She did not reply.

"Blest if she hasn't gone to sleep!" he whispered.

It was true—Zoe had fallen asleep while her father was singing, as she had often done when a child.

"Now, how will I move her without waking her?" thought the blind man. "I cannot sit here with her; I must get her to her bed some way."

Gently he lifted her in his arms and arose to his feet. With the greatest caution, he moved across the floor, feeling his way step by step, and passed into the other room. He found the bed and placed her upon it without arousing her.

"Sleep," he whispered, softly—"sleep and forget!"

Cautiously he stole out of the room.

The midnight hour had passed when Bent was aroused by a sudden thump on the door. He sat up quickly, and as he did so, the door was torn from its hinges with a crash.

The following moment, a band of masked men rushed into the room.

They were the dastardly crew known as the Land Sharks!

With a cry, Blind Tom leaped to his feet.

"Seize him!" commanded the leader. "Work lively, lads; we have no time to waste. One of you bring out the girl."

But, as the men grasped Blind Bent, he hurled them aside as if they were children.

"Devils!" he cried. "If I only had my eyes I would be a match for you all!"

"Furies!" snarled Captain Shark. "Grab the fool and hold him fast!"

"That voice!" shouted the blind man. "My God! It is that of Jack Howard!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BLIND BENT'S ACCUSATION.

THE chief of the Sharks snarled in his fierce anger.

"Your ears are altogether too sharp for your own good, old man!" he cried.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" came brokenly from Blind Tom's lips; "can it be you have come to this? I cannot believe it!"

"I am not Jack Howard, you fool!"

"Don't say that! You cannot deceive me! Great God! what a false, treacherous creature you are!"

"Oh, stow that kind of gab! Your ears deceive you!"

"My ears do not deceive me! I know your voice, Jack Howard. The blind man has found you out—he knows you now for what you are!"

The chief sprang forward till he was within arm's length of the apparently helpless man, then he hissed:

"You say you know me for what I am. Well, let it be so—what care I! You are nothing to me, old man; it is your daughter I want and your daughter I will have! You are as the dust under my feet. What care I if you do know me! Far from this place, Little Zoe shall be mine!"

Two of the outlaws were holding fast to the blind man, but he struggled to break from their grasp.

"Hold fast," commanded the chief. "Do not let him get away for your lives! If there is danger he will do so, put him to sleep with a gentle tap."

At this moment a shriek—Zoe's voice!—came from the adjoining room.

With the strength of a Samson, Bent flung the men staggering from him.

"Oh, you devils!" he thundered. "You human fiends! Blind though I am, you will find me no child! You would rob me of all I hold dear; but there is a God above who pities the unfortunate! He will give me strength to—"

"Daddy!"

Zoe uttered the cry, as one of the outlaws brought her into the room. The blind man wheeled toward her, rushing forward, with outstretched arms.

"My little one—my life! I will protect you!"

"A thousand curses!" cried Captain Shark. "Stop him, men! Do not allow him to reach the girl!"

Half-Hand Hugh leaped forward to obey; but at that moment it seemed as if the blind father had regained the power of sight, for his fist shot straight out from the shoulder, striking the ruffian fairly between the eyes and sending him reeling to the floor. Surely Providence guided the blow!

The next moment Bent reached his child and tore her from the hands of the man who held her.

"Oh, for a weapon!" he cried, as he whirled her behind him and faced the astonished outlaws. "If I had a weapon, I would be more than a match for you all, blind as I am!"

"It must be the devil aids him!" exclaimed Captain Shark.

"I'm not serving your master, Jack Howard!" was the parent's retort. "It is the One Above who gives me strength and guides me through this Stygian blackness! In Him the blind man puts his trust! He will yet see that you receive your just dues, treacherous wretch!"

"Car-r-ramba!" hissed the Spaniard, Pedro.

"Kill the big American! Shoot him!"

"Hold!" commanded the captain. "Do not try that! The girl may be injured! Careful, lads!"

Zoe crouched against the partition, terror written on her face. She had been aroused from pleasant dreams to this horrible struggle, and she still doubted her senses. Might she not be dreaming still? Was it not one of those wonderful changes which the dream-god sometimes manipulates? Was it not a horrible phantom of the night?

"Jack!"

The name broke from her lips as her eyes rested on the form of the masked chief. Could it be? It was Jack's figure and Jack's voice! Her father addressed him as Jack Howard. But—no, no! She would not believe it! It could not be Jack was such a treacherous and vile creature! Still her eyes clung to the man as if she was fascinated.

"We are wasting valuable time," came from beneath the chief's sable mask. "The town might be aroused, and then Satan himself would be to pay! Some one look out for the girl; I will fix the old man."

He drew a revolver and advanced toward Blind Bent. As he came forward, Zoe sprang past her father and fell on her knees before the chief of the mountain league.

"Jack!" she cried, with her hands upstretched pleadingly. "Is it you, Jack—can it be?"

He halted a moment and gazed down at her through the twin holes in the dark mask. It seemed that he attempted to speak, but failed.

"It is!" she almost shrieked. "It is Jack! Oh, merciful God! let me die!"

In another moment she lay unconscious at his feet, her golden curls half-concealing the face that was as white as that of the dead.

It seemed as if Blind Tom understood what had happened, for he groped forward with his hands outstretched and fell on his knees beside his child, sobbing:

"Zoe, Zoe, Zoe! My little one—my soul! Where are you? Ah!"

He had found her; his hands ran over her unconscious form; he understood what had hap-

pened. Tenderly he picked her up in his arms and held her close to his heart for a single moment. Then he kissed her and laid her down again.

Strangely enough, although the opportunity was all that could be asked for, not one of the outlaws lifted a hand to molest the man while he remained on his knees. They stood as if spell-bound by the strange scene. Rough, desperate, brutal men though they were, there was something about the exhibition of a blind father's love and grief that chained them in their tracks. It almost seemed as if Captain Shark ceased to breathe as he stood like a statue, staring, staring.

When he had placed his child upon the floor once more, Bent leaped to his feet and stood over her, his hands clinched, his powerful arms outstretched.

"May the curse of God rest on the heads of the wretches who have brought that child there!" burst from the bearded lips.

They shrank back before the sightless eyes turned upon them. There was something awful, awe-inspiring about the stricken parent's demeanor—something that made them shudder. He turned his face upward and stretched his hands toward heaven. His lips moved, and they knew he was praying, though they heard no sound. At that moment he was like blind Samson of old asking God for strength to pull down the temple upon the heads of his enemies.

"This is folly!" Captain Shark finally cried; "look after the girl; I will attend to the old man."

As he sprang forward, Bent calmly faced him.

"I cannot see you, Jack Howard," said the blind man, slowly. "All is dark before my eyes but I put my trust in God."

The chief made no reply, but, like a cat, he dodged behind Bent, reversing his heavy revolver as he did so. His arm was upraised, and an instant later the butt of the weapon crashed down on the blind man's head, the blow being delivered with all the force of a muscular arm.

Without a groan, Tom Bent fell to the floor, unconscious.

"That settles his hash!" triumphantly laughed the leader. "He was the worst customer for a blind man it has ever been my fortune to meet."

"Shall we snuff him out, boss?" asked one of the men, bending over the fallen man, a knife gleaming in his hand.

"No; if my blow has not ended his career, let him go. We have no particular desire to leave bloody work behind. Pick up the girl, Rule, and see that you handle her gently. She is as precious as pure gold."

As the men left the cabin Captain Shark extinguished the light which Bent was in the habit of keeping burning. Horses were awaiting them near at hand. They mounted and rode away into the night.

For a very long time Tom Bent lay motionless in the darkness, like one who had received his death-blow. Finally, he stirred a bit and moaned slightly.

The cool night-breeze blew in at the shattered cabin-door, and swept across his face. Beneath its touch he slowly revived. At length, he sat up.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

A blood-chilling sound—a meaningless laugh! It echoed through the cabin.

"I have been sleeping—sleeping! What a fool to sleep on the floor! Ha! ha! what a fool! I feel kind of odd like. I reckon I must be getting old—old—old. This working every day tells on a man after he gets along in years. How dark it is! It must be a powerful dark night! But I'll have to turn out early enough and go at it again. What a fool a man is to sleep on the floor! Get up, get up! Well, well! I'm dizzy like! Have I been sick?"

The talk was that of one whose mind was shaken.

"What ails my head? It feels strange—is throbbing as if it would burst. What—what—"

He paused and was silent for a time; then he began again:

"There is something sticky in my hair. What is it? I'll know when morning comes and I can see. Oh—ho!"

He began to sing softly. For a long time he kept humming over and over a bit of a lively tune.

Suddenly a shriek broke from his lips.

"What's that?" and he bounded to his feet, shivering back in the darkness, his hands outstretched as if he would ward off some fearful thing. "Keep off, you fiends from Hades! Ah—ah! Hiss and snarl, dart out your fiery tongues; but, keep off—keep off!"

Strange and terrible visions seemed to float before his sightless eyes. He fancied he was surrounded by a circle of fiery fiends, who were dancing in devilish glee, grinning, pointing their long fingers at him and hissing like serpents.

With a hoarse shout he sprang forward to break through the circle, dashing straight against the wall, and being hurled to the floor by the shock. In a moment he was on his feet again.

"Ah-a! I am not easily conquered!" he cried, pantingly, once more making a dash.

Out through the open doorway he bounded and hurried from the cabin. In the morning he was found wandering aimlessly up and down Jericho's principal street, muttering in a meaningless manner. Old Plug Ugly was among those who discovered the blind man.

"Derned ef 'tain't Tom Bent!" exclaimed the old miner. "He looks like he hed been run over by er cyclone. He hain't got no hat on, and—Blue blazes! W'at's thet on his face? Blood, by thunder!"

Filled with wonder, the men gathered around the blind man.

"Hello, Bent," saluted Old Plug. "W'at's ter pay?"

"Dark, dark, dark!" mumbled Tom, thrusting out his hands in the empty air. "Will it never come morning? I am tired of this darkness—I am afraid of it! It weighs down on me like a load. The night is long, long—so long!"

The men looked at each other in wonder. Old Plug Ugly shook his head, gravely.

"It's mornin', Tom," he said, laying a hand on the unfortunate man's arm.

Bent shook his head, almost fiercely.

"Don't lie to me!" he cried, hoarsely. "Don't you suppose I can tell when it is light? It is the blackest night I ever knew—and the longest. I am tired waiting for it to come light again—tired, tired!"

The old miner tapped his own forehead significantly.

"Plum' gone erg'in!" he said. "I've seen him this way afore. Derned ef 'tain't too bad!"

"He has been hurt," said one of the men.

"Hurt hisself most likely. Blamed ef this won't be tough on ther leetle gal! I pity pore Leetle But'ercup!"

"Little Buttercup," repeated Bent, slowly. "What does that mean? Who—what is Little Buttercup?"

"It's Zoe, your own gal."

The blind man uttered a cry and smote his clinched fists together.

"Zoe!" he shouted—"my little Zoe! where is she? What have they done with her?"

"Most prob'ly she's waitin' fer ye at ther cabin. Ef you'll come with me, I'll take ye thar, Bent."

"No, no, no! she is not there! They have taken her away! Do you hear? I tell you they have taken my treasure away! Oh, the devils!"

The men looked inquiringly at each other.

"Ten ter one it's er fancy o' his muddled head," declared the old miner. "Ther chances are thet he's got up in ther night an' wandered out hyer without ther leetle gal knowin' er derned thing o' it a tall. We mus' git him back, fer she'll be crazy w'en she fines him gone."

"Come, come, ole man! jes' you trot erlong with me. You're er leetle off ther hooks now, but I reckon you'll come roun' all straight putty soon."

But, Blind Tom shook off Plug's hand.

"I tell you she's gone!" he shouted. "They came in the night and carried her away! I remember now. It must be they struck me senseless. My God! poor Zoe!"

"He seems all right now," said one of the men. "I more than half believe there is something in what he says."

"It's jest possible," admitted the old miner.

"Though thet wuz ther way ther Lan' Sharks worked ther game t'other time. Ef Jack Howard wuz only hyer—"

"That dastard!" grated Bent. "He was the leader of the gang! He it is who has stolen my child from me!"

"Now I know he's daft!" snorted Old Plug Ugly. "Clean gone outer his head, pore devil!"

"Here comes Jack Howard now!"

The young man was approaching the little gathering. He gave a start of amazement as his eyes fell on Blind Bent, then he hurried swiftly forward, exclaiming:

"What does this mean. Mr. Bent, you—"

A cry of fury broke from the blind man's lips.

"You devil!" he shouted. "It was you who stole my child from me! You have ruined my life; but I will have yours to pay for your black work!"

Then he sprung upon the young man and seized him by the throat?

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD PLUG SHOWS HIS FRIENDSHIP.

"EASY thar, you!" ejaculated Old Plug Ugly, catching at Bent's wrists and wrenching the furious man's grasp from Howard's neck. "Jest take er reef in your jib an' lay to fer er time. I reckon you don't more'n hafe know w'at's the matter with ye!"

The sudden onslaught had so taken Jack by surprise that he seemed incapable of making a move. He stood still and stared at the blind man in amazement.

"Let me go!" grated Bent. "Let me get at that dastardly wretch and I will force the truth from his lips or end his treacherous life!"

The old miner was strong, but the angry parent was stronger, and he tore himself from Plug's grasp, sending the veteran staggering to one side.

"Where is he?" cried Bent, groping with outstretched hands—"where is the dastard?"

"Dad-burn er fool!" spluttered the stubbed miner, growing flushed in the face at the thought of being so easily cast aside. "Ef we don't putt er chain on thet critter, he'll be hurtin' some galoot yit."

He sprung forward and clutched Bent savagely by the collar, fairly hissing:

"Listen ter me, you cracked-brain! Ef you chain up er bit we'll be able ter git ther truth o' this matter; but ef you keep kerryin' on this way, you'll keep us in er muddle. You've hed er tap on ther noddle thet hes set yer wits ter ramblin' an' filled yer head with crazy notions."

"You are wrong if you think I am deranged now," asserted Blind Tom, with an attempt at calmness. "A short time ago I may have seemed out of my mind, but everything has come back to me now. I remember all that transpired."

"Wal, that's so much ther better, fer we want ye ter tell us w'at it wuz. We hain't bin able ter git head nor tail ter this business yit. Guv us ther p'int."

"In the dead of the night a band of men came to the cabin and stole my child. They were led by Jack Howard."

"Easy thar! How do you know thet?"

"I heard his voice."

"But, you can't see. I 'low your ole ears played crooked on ye thet time."

"That is where you are mistaken. Zoe recognized Jack Howard, and fainted clean away."

Plug was astonished, to say the least.

"How do ye know she recognized him?" he asked.

"Because she spoke his name."

"Wal, I don't 'low thet wuz ary sign," was the veteran's dogged assertion.

By this time Jack had recovered himself sufficiently to speak, but his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural, as he demanded:

"What is all this about? Can it be true that Zoe has been kidnapped?"

"Nobody should know better than you, treacherous friend!" cried Bent. "You led the gang of desperadoes who—"

"It is false!" bursting hotly from the lips of the accused. "My God! That you should think this of me, Mr. Bent! But, I cannot believe Zoe has really, and truly been kidnapped. There is some mistake—there must be!"

"It is plain you play your part well!" exclaimed the father of the stolen girl. "But, though you deceive every one else, you cannot deceive me. I know you now for what you are—a black-hearted scoundrel!"

"The man is mad!"

"I am not. Yesterday, when you found I had learned the truth about your past life, you declared Zoe should be yours anyway. I told you to prove your innocence. Instead of that, you have chosen the means of a cowardly dastard. She is in your power now, but God will not suffer her to remain thus. Your day will come, Jack Howard!"

Many of the men were convinced by Bent's earnest words, and an ominous murmur went round—a murmur that boded no good to Jack. Old Plug Ugly heard it and fully understood its import. With an involuntary oath, he wheeled on the men.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "You're altogether too previous! Thar hain't no proof erg'in' Jack, an' ef thar wuz er pile o' proof ez high ez Pike's Peak, I'll be eternally blowed ter blazes ef I'd believe it! Don't you critters begin ter growl till thar's suthin' ter growl fer! W'y, blame it all! we don't even know fer sure thet ther gal's gone!"

That was enough. In another moment a cry went up:

"Let's go an' see!"

Then the crowd which had gathered in a remarkably brief space of time, surged toward the blind man's cabin, Jack Howard being at the very van. Old Plug Ugly caught hold of Bent's arm and hurried him along with the others.

"Ther game's opened fer another run," grimly muttered the old miner. "Ther cards are putt up erg'in' ther boy, an' he's goin' ter hev er mighty hard pull o' it, but I'll stan' by him."

The cabin was reached and found deserted. The battered door was discovered where it fell when torn from its hinges by the assault of the outlaws.

"It's plain enough that Bent told the truth," said one of the crowd.

"This is an outrage!" howled Bad Man Bob, who was with the crowd. "Gal stole! Howlin' Hottentots! I reckon I'll hev ter go on ther war-path fer skelps."

Four Ace Frank said nothing, but he keenly watched Jack Howard.

"You can see my child is gone," said Blind Bent, as he stood in the middle of the room. "They came and tore her from me. I did my best to save her, but I am blind, blind, blind!"

"Lynchin' 's too good fer ther devils!"

"They deserve ther hottest corner down below!"

"I reckon it must hev been some of ther ole band of Lan' Sharks."

"But they wuz lynched."

"Not all of them."

"No; some escaped as deserved lynching as much as the others."

"Jack Howard, fer instance. He wuz one of ther pesky gang."

"An' I reckon Bent's right in sayin' he's at ther bottom of this job."

These mutterings boded ill for Jack.

Old Plug Ugly found the young man's side.

"She's gone, lad," said the old miner, in a low tone. "Thet's plain. I reckon Bent is right 'bout her bein' kerried off."

Jack seemed dazed.

"I can hardly bring myself to believe it, Plug," he declared. "Who could have done this?"

"Your enemies, boy—ther Sharks who still remain above ther groun'. Lad, you've got er mighty hard row ter hoe. You know ole Bent swears you led ther gang."

Sudden fire seemed to run through the young man's veins. He threw back his head, his nostrils dilated.

"He has allowed himself to be deceived," was his firm declaration.

"But w'at erbout his yarn o' ther gal recog'nizin' ye an' faintin'?"

Jack shook his head.

"There is some mystery about it."

"Well, we've got ter do suthin'."

"You are right. We must follow these kidnapping devils and save poor Zoe. I will know no rest till she is safe. Are you with me, old man?"

"Ter ther death, boy—ter ther death!"

They clasped hands.

"Ef ther crowd gits kind o' r'ily, don't ye mine 'em," advised the veteran. "You jest let me ingineer this year business. Ef they try ter kick up er bobbery, I'll make 'em stan' in their places ur I'll know ther reason why, amen!"

Jack's enemies were at work and the feeling against him was increasing. Some began to express their minds openly.

Jack paid little heed to what was passing. Indeed, he scarcely noticed, for his thoughts were of a bitter nature. Fate seemed against him.

A party of those who believed, or pretended to believe, him guilty moved out of the cabin, but paused to discuss the matter near the door.

A few moments later, Jack also passed out.

Old Plug Ugly was startled by hearing a wild chorus of shouts. He glanced swiftly around, and, failing to discover his young friend, leaped toward the door, uttering a savage oath.

He looked upon a startling tableau.

Jack Howard stood with his back against the cabin wall, his dark eyes flashing over the barrels of two cocked revolvers, as he faced the savage-looking mob that had hemmed him in.

"Lynch ther cuss!"

"String him up!"

"Fill him with lead!"

"Wipe him out!"

Such were the savage cries which came from the enraged throng.

"Stand off!" came sharply from the young man's lips, not a tremor of fear noticeable in his voice. "If you crp'd me, some of you will go to your final reckoning!"

A grim smile flashed over Old Plug Ugly's homely face.

"Thet's ther right kind o' stuff!" he muttered, approvingly, pausing to admire the spectacle.

"I'll tie ter sech er boy fer keeps. Derned ef he hain't clean grit an' pure white!"

Four Ace Frank stepped forward and confronted the man at bay.

"You may as well surrender," he said, icily.

"It cannot be you will be fool enough to pit yourself against all these men!"

Jack instantly covered the 'Frisco sport.

"Well, that is the exact size of it," was his quiet retort. "I am not the fool you take me for. I shall not give myself up to this mob to be lynched."

"Then we shall take you."

"The others may, but you will not be in it. When the break is made, I shall deliberately salt you for keeps."

The gambler fell back a step.

"You are a bigger idiot than I thought!" he cried. "That would only make your death more certain. There is no escape for you, and you have no friends—"

"Thet's er blazin' lie!" was Old Plug Ugly's assertion, as he pushed his way to the young man's side. "Jest you take a squint at me, partner. I'm leetle, but, oh, my! You bet yer boots I git thar ev'ry time, an' I'm swearin' by ther boy tell ther cows come home. Ef you straddle him, you'll hev ter straddle me. Savvy?"

Up to this moment Bad Man Bob had been prominent in the front row of those who had driven Jack Howard to the wall; but the little fire-eater sidled off as soon as Plug took a hand.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, shaking his head.

"I'm er wolf, I am; but thet's too tough chawin' fer me. I 'low I'll be excused fer er couple or three minutes while I git round the corner outer pistol range."

Four Ace Frank flushed angrily.

"What do you mean, old man?" he demanded, gazing coldly at the veteran of the mines.

"Business, bet yer shirt!" was the prompt re-

sponse. "This boy is my side-pard, an' I sticks ter him like er burr in er muel's tail."

"You will get yourself into trouble."

"Woof! Thet's jest w'at I'm lookin' fer, I live on trouble. It's my reg'ler daily fodder, an' I grow fat on it. I 'low that ef I ever had any name but the one I'm known by now, it mus' 'a' bin Trouble."

"That young man is accused of being chief of the gang that kidnapped the girl known as Zoe."

"Who 'cuses him?"

"Zoe's father."

"Er bline man. His evvydence won't stan'."

"He recognized the young man's voice."

"Voices are mighty deceptive. I know er galoot whose voice soun's monst'rus like Jack's sometimes."

"Who is it?"

"He calls hisself Four Ace Frank since he struck this town!"

The man from 'Frisco uttered an oath of astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he cried, his voice having a hard, dangerous ring. "Is that an insinuation?"

"Is it er w'at? I reckon it's w'at some folks 'd call er coincidence. I jes' mentioned it ter 'lustrate how anybody might be deceived in voices."

For several moments Four Ace Frank was silent, a dark scowl on his face. It was plain he was not pleased by the situation. He did not fancy failing in his attempt to crush Jack Howard at once, but, since Old Plug Ugly's appearance, the men at his back had been strangely silent, and he felt sure they stood in awe of the dauntless old miner. He was certain Jack was already fast in the toils, and it would be only a matter of time before the young man would meet disaster. Perhaps it would be better not to crowd the matter too soon.

"Well, as I am not an old citizen of this town, I am not the one to go ahead with this affair. I was simply acting as spokesman for the crowd."

"Wuz thet all?" inquired Plug, derisively.

"That was all," was the 'Frisco sport's unruffled assurance. "If the others feel like letting up on the young fellow, I have not a word to say."

"Then you're dumb ez er clam," nodded the miner; "fer ther others are clean out o' it sence I clipped in. They know me, an' they know which side o' their hard-tack's soaked in the'r coffee. I hain't in ther habit o' talkin' 'less I say suthin', an' ez I hev hed my say, I'll chain up."

"Come, lad," turning to Jack, "put up them barkers an' trot erlong with me. Ef we yank ther leetle gal outer this scrape, we've got business—baydoogius o' it—ahead o' us."

He locked arms with Jack Howard and led him through the crowd, not a hand being raised to stop them.

CHAPTER XV.

JACK AND THE OLD MINER STRIKE OUT.

"Er blamed set o' snarlin' curs!" commented Old Plug, with a backward toss of his head, as they passed beyond ear-shot of the crowd. "All they need is some 'un ter rub their ears an' sic 'em on. We paddled our way outer thergang er derned sight easier then I 'spected ter w'en I saw ye cornered with yer shooters in yer paws. 'Bout thet time I reckoned thar'd be war ter ther hilt an' lead 'd fly like hailstuns. I didn't low thet double-blanked critter from 'Frisco 'd let up on his grip so easy, fer I cal'lated he wuzn't ther boy ter swaller bluff. But er bluff game goes er long ways if it's played right, bet yer socks!"

"The fools!" cried Jack. "They wanted to lynch me!"

Plug nodded vigorously three or four times.

"On, yes! thet wuz their game, an' ef they'd got ye started fer ther tree, it'd taken clean grit an' sheer force ter snaked ye outer their han's. W'en er gang o' human critters git ter whooin' fer blood an' hev ther victim foul, they're ther conformedest set ter call off you most never saw. They don't seem ter hev no sense in their heads a tall."

"It was fortunate for me you stepped in just as you did, old friend. But for you, I would have been forced to shoot."

"Sart'in sure; an' ef ye hed shot oncet, it'd bin all day with ye. Ther Ole Boy hisself c'u'dn't 'a' stopped 'em then. It'd made 'em wild ez mad dogs in August."

"Then I really have you to thank for my life. I will not forget it, old man!"

"Course ye won't, lad! I know you're made o' ther right timber, an' I'm swearin' by ye an' ther leetle gal. Things hev got er crosswise hitch jest now, but we'll yank ther kinks out o' 'em afore we git through, an' we won't ax holp o' any blamed critter as breathes. I reckon thar'll be ernough come roun' w'en they dis-kiver ther truth, as they're mighty sart'in ter in ther en'."

"What do you propose to do, Plug?"

"Git up an' git outer this town like we wuz sent fer. Ther gal has been kerried ter some new retreat o' ther Sharks. We know ther kentry roun' this section putty well, an' we'll skulk it over. Ten ter one we git on ther scent an' fine whar she bes bin taken."

"But we will be only two against odds."

"We're good fer ther odds, boy. But we'll hev frien's ef we need 'em."

"How is that?"

"I kin fine 'em in Pick Pocket."

"But they would not be at hand when we discovered where the kidnappers had taken Zoe."

"Don't you worry 'bout thet, lad. Ef we are hard up, we'll be able ter git some o' ther galoots from this camp ter holp us."

"Then you think—"

"Thet thar'll be er party start out from Jericho afore long fer ther apparent puppose o' reskyn' ther gal. I don't 'low they'll succeed ef Four Ace Frank is with 'em."

"You believe that man had a hand in the black work?"

"Thet's w'at I've got inter my ole noddle, an' I don't often git fur off ther hooks. Ter be course, I may be wrong, but I don't figger thet I am. He tole me he'd taken er fancy ter ther gal, an' I 'low he's played er mighty stiff han' ter leave you out in ther cold."

"The more I see of that man, the firmer becomes my conviction that we have met some time in the past. I wish I could place him."

"He may be an ole enemy o' yours."

"That is true."

"Ef so, he's workin' this game fer revenge an' ter win ther prize he is stuck on at ther same time. Burn my cle eyes! I believe thet's ther way ther lan' lays!"

"Still, he is not one of the original Sharks, and, outside of them, I do not know of a living enemy who would put himself to so much trouble for the sake of getting square with me. I am all adrift."

"It duz look smoky now, but I 'low we'll git some light on ther subjec' afore we are done. But, all ther while, you want ter keep yer peepers onter Four Ace Frank o' 'Frisco. Look out fer him right erlong, an' in ther en' you will git straddle o' ther pesky critter's coat-collar. Then you'll be able ter yank ther packin' outer him in double-quick order. I'll jest stan' roun' an' grin wile you make ther fur fly."

"But what is the next move you propose to make, Plug?"

"Git some bosses. Hev you er good critter thet kin be depended on?"

Jack shook his head.

"My horse is dead lame."

"Then I'll fit ye out. Jest you goter ther hotel and make preppy rashuns fer bein' erway an indefinite 'mount o' time. Hev ye a Winchester?"

"No."

"Wal, then I'll git one fer ye. Take yer small guns an' plenty o' ammynishun. We may strike er reg'ler little war afore we git back."

"Where shall I find you?"

"I'll git roun' ter ther hotel soon's I git ready fer liz. You wait fer me thar."

"All right."

They separated, and Jack hurried straight to the hotel. Ascending the stairs, he was surprised to come face to face with Antoinette in the passage above. The French siren looked at him with a triumphant smile on her face.

"What ees zis zat I do hear?" she asked.

"What ees zis about ze leetle girl being carry off?"

Jack attempted to pass her without replying, but she stepped in front of him.

"Why you no answer me, Harree! I ask you ze question."

"I would like to pass."

"Ees zat so? Well, you can pass when you have answer. Eef you do pass before, you will be rude to a lady. You would not do zat, for you are one gallant man."

"I have no time to waste in talk."

"Zen why you don't answer?"

He made a gesture that caused her eyes to flash.

"Ze monsieur need not answer!" she cried.

"I know ze trute. Eet is ze girl zat be love who has been carry off. Ha! ha!"

There was something in her laugh that filled his soul with fury. Forgetting himself for a moment, he clutched her savagely by the shoulder, hissing:

"I believe you had a hand in this foul work, you treacherous creature!"

Her eyes met his defiantly, but her lips said:

"Your fingers hurt, Monsieur Weelson."

"I beg your pardon," he said, as his hand fell from her shoulder and he stepped back. "I am sorry I forgot myself enough to touch you."

There was scorn in his voice which she could not fail to perceive. Her dark face flushed and then turned very white.

"Ah!" she panted. "You are so full of ze contempt! But, I will see you diffrent in ze pret-tee soon. You will be—what zey call eet? humble."

"You are foolish to think you can ever humble me."

"Zat I will do!" she hissed, her small hands clinched. "You are ze firs' man zat evar scorn me. I will show you what eet is to do zat! Once you make love to me; now you scorn me. Well, I will make you wish you never see Antoinette!"

"I wish that already with all my heart. Had

I never seen you, you would not be here to prison the heart of my loved one with your falsehoods."

"Ha! But I do succeed in zat! She t'ink you are one bad man. I have ruin your hope of evar getting ze leetle girl for ze wife of you."

"You have not! She shall be mine! I will triumph for all of your foul arts!"

"You t'ink so? Well, you have ze pluck!" she confessed, with something like admiration.

"Harree, you are more of ze man zan in ze old days. Eef you only care for me, I love you more zan I do zen."

He made a gesture of disgust.

"Why will you speak of such a thing? You should know I hold you in the greatest contempt. Love you! I could as soon love a viper!"

She lifted her eyebrows.

"Zen I will hate you, Harree," was her cool declaration. "You will find zat my love ees much better zan my hate."

"Oh, I care nothing for either!"

"Zen I will make you care! I have ze power!"

"Your threats sound ridiculous."

"Ees zat so? Well, zey mean what you call beesness. You say you t'ink zat I haf some hand in ze work of last night. Ha! ha! Perhaps I do; who can tell?"

Once more the young man came near forgetting himself, but, by a powerful effort, he restrained his passions.

"Have you completed your say?"

"Oui, monsieur."

Without another word, he passed her and entered his room. When the door closed behind him, she stood in the passage and shook one tiny clinched hand at it.

He hastily made preparations for the expedition. A few moments later, he stepped out into the passage again. As he did so, he was surprised to see the gambler, Four Ace Frank, disappearing through the doorway that led into Antoinette's room.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, softly. "That reveals the fact that they are connected in some way. There is no doubt about it, that card-sharp is my deadly enemy. Old Plug Ugly was right, as he usually is. I must look out for Four Ace Frank."

He descended the stairs and informed the proprietor of the hotel that he might be away indefinitely, but paid for his room two weeks in advance, so it would be retained for him.

Plug was at the door with two fine horses and a pair of Winchesters.

"Hyer we are ready fer biz," nodded the veteran, as Jack appeared. "But w'at hev ye struck, lad? Yer face says ye hev lighted on suthin'."

With a few words, the young man told his friend what had passed since he entered the hotel.

"Thet shows how ther lan' lays," nodded Plug. "I 'lowed 'twus thet way. I saw ther galoot from 'Frisco go inter ther shanty jest er bit ergo, an' I wuz erfraild you'd run up ergin' him an' hev er leetle diffikilty. Oh, he's in cahoots with ther gal, an' they both mean ye p'ison."

"But hop up, lad, an' we'll canter out o' town afore ther congregation gathers. Some o' ther critters are fillin' up with bug-juice over at ther Met, an' I smell smoke in ther air. We'll 'void trouble by gittin' like we wuz sent fer an' et wuz er case o' git thar, Eli, or bust."

Jack swung himself into the saddle. Plug passed him one of the Winchesters, and they rode slowly out of town.

They had passed beyond the Metropolitan when a crowd came pouring out at the open doorway. They saw the two friends, and the next moment a chorus of savage yells went up.

"Yell, you 'tarnal imps!" exclaimed Old Plug Ugly, without turning in the saddle. "Squawk erway! Bust yer blamed throats fer all I keer! We can't stop ter see w'at's ther matter with ye now, an' ther fac' is, we don't keer er boot. W'en we kin back fer good, you'll be ready ter git down on yer stummics an' let us walk on yer necks."

"If we ever come back at all, it will be when Little Zoe is safe out of the hands of the wretches who kidnapped her."

"Right, boy; right you are. We'll save ther gal, ur guv up our wind tryin', amen!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FOUR ACE FRANK'S LITTLE GAME.

WHEN Zoe recovered consciousness she found she was being carried through the night on the back of a horse. A pair of strong arms held her fast, making it plain the horse bore a double load.

She did not cry out or struggle. Indeed, it almost seemed as if her life had gone out of her body. She felt utterly helpless, and her heart was crushed by a great despair. Life looked black and barren before her.

"False! false! false!"

The hateful word kept ringing in her brain. Still it almost seemed like a horrible dream. But yesterday she was so happy; now she was so miserable! All her bright visions of the future had been destroyed like vapor before a strong wind. What had she to live for? Nothing, nothing!

Wrong! She still had something to live for—

her daddy! But, what of him? She knew not what had transpired after she became unconscious. Was her father still living? Had not the dastardly outlaws slain him?

The thought was horrible in the extreme, and she started convulsively.

"Hello!" growled the man who held her. "The bird is showin' signs of bein' hyer. She flutters."

"Handle her gently, Rule," cautioned another. "You know ther cap'n sets er mighty high value on her."

"Yep, I know. But it dus beat ther Old Boy hisself how ev'ry boss we hev git's stuck onter some female an' tangles us up in trouble that way."

"Still, I don't reckon you're ther man ter kick at w'at this one does. He's er holy horror on ten wheels, ter say ther very least."

"You're shoutin'," acknowledged the giant negro. "He's ther worst man I ever set eyes on, an' I'd rather tussle with ther devil hisself than with him."

Once more they rode on in silence.

During all that long ride Zoe's thoughts were of her father and Jack Howard. Bitter thoughts, indeed!

Morning was not far away when the kidnapers reached their retreat, the cavern where the masked unknown had defeated their best men single-handed and become their accepted chief. The poor girl was carried into the black recesses of the mountain den.

Zoe was left alone in a little chamber with an entrance so narrow that it was with difficulty her burly captor could squeeze through. Before he departed, he said:

"T'won't be any use fer ye ter try ter 'scape, gal, fer thar will be er guard right out hyer close at han'."

The warning was needless. She had no thoughts of trying to escape. She did not even pause to look around her dismal prison-chamber, which was dimly lighted by a swinging lamp. Down on a blanket cot in the corner she flung herself, utter despair having captured her heart.

How long she lay there she had no means of knowing. It seemed days.

A hand touched her on the shoulder, and she lifted her haggard face to see a masked man bending over her, a rude tray of food in his hand. He uttered an exclamation as he saw her face.

"Now, this yere's too bad!" said the mask, with an attempt at kindness. "You are spoiling your good looks, little girl. I swear, I am sorry for you, or my handle is not Dividend Dave—Great Scott! but I have given myself away now!"

"What do you want?" Zoe managed to ask.

"I have brought you some fodder."

"I do not want it."

"Oh, come now! that won't do! You will pine away and die if you do not eat. You had better eat something, miss."

"I cannot."

"Perhaps you can if you try. You had better keep up a good heart, for you may come out all right in the end. If it wasn't for my own neck, I'd hope so, anyway."

"You are kind, sir," she declared, touched by the man's rude attempt at encouragement. "I did not expect it. I thank you."

"Curse my head!" exploded the outlaw, with a fierceness that was startling, "that I should ever be in such crooked business as this! My old mother taught me better, but I got to drifting to the dogs, and here I am. I reckon there is no hope for me. But I do pity you, little girl. I will leave this food. Perhaps you may be able to eat some, by and by. I am to act as your guard, but I will not inflict upon you my presence. If you want anything, step to the rocks there and call. I shall be where I can hear you."

And, after once more telling her she had better eat something, he left the chamber.

Again Zoe sunk down on the cot and the hours dragged slowly by. Once more the masked guard entered the chamber and spoke to her, but she paid no heed to him. She heard him mutter: "Poor girl, poor girl!" and go softly out.

It seemed as if she had lain upon the couch for weeks when at last she bestirred herself and sat up.

"It is true I must try to eat," she muttered. "I must live to know what is my daddy's fate."

With great difficulty she succeeded in swallowing some of the food, aided by draughts of water.

While she was thus occupied, she was startled by a strange sound that came from the passage beyond the narrow opening. It was like a dull, sodden blow.

With her hand pressed to her heart, she listened.

Following the blow were sounds of a desperate struggle, accompanied by heavy breathing. This continued for several minutes, and Zoe stood frozen with horror, for she fancied two human beings were battling for life out there in the darkness. At length there were more blows, a low groan—then silence!

What had happened? She asked herself the question, but could only think of one answer. There *had* been a struggle for life in the passage beyond!

Hark! Another sound—a sound that sends the icy blood to her heart. It is low and soft, as if some inanimate thing were being dragged over the rocky floor.

Filled with terror, the girl shrank back to the wall, her dilated eyes fixed on the black opening. But, the sounds grew fainter and fainter. The victor in the struggle was dragging his victim away! She could have shrieked with horror, but her tongue seemed frozen in her mouth. Not a sound could she utter.

Silence once more in the passage. Still she stood and listened and stared. The minutes rolled slowly past.

What was that?

A soft footfall! Some one was approaching! Shrinking still closer against the wall, she stared fixedly at the dark opening.

A moment later a masked man appeared. A gasp of relief came from her lips as she saw what appeared to be the kindly-spoken man who brought her food. He paused, lifted his hand and made a warning gesture.

Filled with conflicting emotions—doubt, fear, vague hope—she silently watched him enter the chamber and approach.

"Hist!" he whispered. "I am a friend!"

It was *not* the voice of her original guard!

"Who are you?" she managed to gasp.

"A friend," he repeated. "By the rarest good fortune I have found you. I succeeded in overpowering your guard, and I have left him unconscious, bound hand and foot, and gagged. I exchanged coats and hats with him, and confiscated this mask. Reckon I must look like him some?"

"I thought it was he." And then, as she remembered Dividend Dave's rude attempt at kindness: "Have you killed him?"

"Oh, I guess not, though I did give him one or two heavy thumps on the head. But, I'll allow he will come round all right in time. Still, it will make little difference if he does not. I have no sympathy with these kidnapping bounds."

"You are not one of them?"

"Well, I guess *not*! I am cut from different stock entirely. But I am here to rescue you from their hands, and I will succeed or never see daylight again!"

"It almost seems as if I had heard your voice before, still I know not who you are. That mask—"

"Shall be removed."

With a swift motion, he whipped off the sable covering of his face, and—

The man was Four Ace Frank!

CHAPTER XVII.

FARCE OR TRAGEDY?

THE face revealed was a strange one to Little Zoe, but had not the man said he was there to rescue her? Her condition could not be worse, she thought, and so she would trust him. For the time, she forgot how once before, while in a similar situation, she had been deceived by a treacherous wretch in whom she put the greatest trust. She little thought this man, who had come to her in almost exactly the same manner, might also be a black-hearted villain.

"But, how is it—how did you know?" she faltered.

"All Jericho knows," was the reply. "I was among those to whom your father told his story this morning."

"F-ther—then he was not harmed?"

"Not to speak of. He received a tap on the head, but he is all right now."

"Where is he?"

"With a party from the camp, not far from this cave. I had left the party and was looking around when I espied one of this kidnapping gang and followed him into the cave by the way of a sort of back entrance. We will go out that way."

Zoe became greatly excited.

"Let's go at once!" she gasped, grasping his arm, convulsively. "I wish to get out of this fearful place. My poor old blind daddy—I shall see him!"

"Hold on till I get this mask arranged. If we meet any of the gang, I may be able to fool them. If not, I will fight for you to the last."

"Oh, sir, you are good!" exclaimed the innocent creature. "I will not forget this!"

The gambler lifted his mask and hid the look of satisfaction that flashed over his face. Things were working finely for him, and he felt sure of ultimate triumph. This beautiful girl should become his of her own free will.

"Now I am ready," he said. "Let me take your hand. We will leave the light here, for it might betray us. Now, move as cautiously and silently as possible."

She placed her hand in his, and then, for the first time she was assailed by a doubt. As they passed into the darkness of the passage, she held back a bit, remembering how Desperate Durg had come to her with a similar story when she was in the hands of the Land Sharks once before, and he had afterward turned out to be the chief of the mountain league. But could it be possible such a thing would happen twice in a lifetime? No, no! Once more she moved forward by the man's side.

Darkness shut them in and they crept cautiously along the passage. Occasionally they would stumble a bit and make noises which seemed simply terrific to the girl. Then they would pause and listen, Zoe being able to hear her own heart as it throbbed convulsively in her bosom.

On and on they crept till it seemed as if they must be nearly to the cavern entrance. The man stooped and whispered in the Zoe's ear:

"In a few moments more we will be in the open air."

But, even as he did so, a sudden flash of light was throw over them and they were discovered. A chorus of yells echoed through the underground arches, and several dark forms came bounding toward them.

"Great Heavens!" cried Four Ace Frank. "We are detected!"

He swung Zoe behind him and faced the outlaws, crying:

"Come on, you devils!"

As the men of the mountain league flung themselves upon him, a revolver spoke and there was a cry of pain. A moment later the struggle waged furiously, the man from 'Frisco seeming almost a match for his many foes.

Leaning helplessly against the cavern wall, Zoe watched the dramatic scene revealed by the light of a strong reflector. She had no strength to make an attempt to dash away, although for a few moments she seemed forgotten by the desperadoes, who were doing their best, apparently, to end the life of the man who had come to her rescue.

She saw him beaten back, back, back; still she could do nothing to aid him. Shouts, oaths, blows and groans made a medley of sounds horrible to hear. There had been only one shot, but she saw a dark form lying prone and still on the rocky floor.

"God help him! God help him!" murmured the white lips of the unfortunate girl.

But it became plain Four Ace Frank was no match for his many foes. She saw the struggling mass go reeling into the darkness beyond the boundary of the light thrown from the reflector. Then the cave echoed with shouts of triumph, and she felt sure she knew what had happened. A heavy hand fell on her arm, and a coarse voice hissed in her ear:

"Come on, my pritty; I reckon I'll have ter take ye back ter ther nest ye jest left. Ef Dave can't keep ye fast, we'll hev ter set some'un else ter guard ye."

She allowed him to lead her away, making no protest. To her, what she had witnessed was a terrible tragedy. She little dreamed how much farce there was to it all!

Back to the chamber she was taken, and once more she was left there alone, almost heart-broken.

As the man passed out, she heard a voice say:

"So you have brought her back here, have you? Well, that was right. It is a little rough on poor Zoe, I will admit, but I am bound to be a winner in this little game."

"Bully fer you, cap'n!"

"It was lucky Ben saw the fellow when he followed Sam into the cave. The trap was beautifully set, and it worked to a charm. Quite a surprise it was for the gallant rescuer."

"W'at'll you do with him, cap'n?"

"I suppose I will have to see that his throat is cut. He has found his way into the cave, and it will never do to let him get out. He shall die in an hour."

Zoe shuddered with horror.

"Oh, you monster!" she whispered. "I know your voice, Jack Howard! God protect me from you, fiend that you are! I can scarcely believe it possible you are such a wicked man; and still—and still there is no doubt."

"You will remain here in the passage and act as guard," spoke the voice of the chief. "I will send another one of the boys to keep you company. Now that the prize is in my hands, I do not propose to lose it. If she gets away, you shall answer with your lives. Do you understand?"

"You bet!"

Then she heard retreating footsteps.

Again she flung herself down on the cot in the corner. She did not weep or cry out, for her grief and despair had carried her past that. She lay there, rigid and still, thinking, thinking, till it seemed as if her brain was afire.

She heard the muttering of voices in the passage and knew her guard had been joined by another. She heeded not the flight of time.

Suddenly she was startled by the sounds which came from the cavern beyond the passage. There were shouts and shots. Had the outlaws been attacked? She started up and listened.

The guards in the passage seemed excited, and one of them hurried away with the announced intention of finding out what was the matter. The sound continued, but grew fainter and fainter in the distance.

The guard returned, and to the inquiry of his companion, replied:

"Ther devil's ter pay! Ther feller thet tried ter resky ther gal hes bruck loose an' is makin' er dash fer liberty."

"God aid him to escape!" prayed Little Zoe.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLD PLUG PLAYS A LONE HAND.

"THAR, lads, didn't I tole ye! Thar they are, ther hull kittle o' fish, an' blamed ef they hain't got Blind Bent with 'em! Reckon ther ole man w'u'dn't stay ter home w'ile his gal wuz in danger. He sots his life by Leetle Buttercup, ole Bent duz."

Jack Howard made no immediate reply to Old Plug Ugly's words, but stood gazing down at the party of men who had gathered as if for a consultation in the gorge below. Principal among them, he could recognize Tom Bent and Four Ace Frank. There were at least twenty in all.

A short distance behind Jack and his old miner friend stood their horses.

"Hevin' er council o' war, hain't they, Jack boy?" asked the veteran.

"It looks that way," was the reply.

"An' ther four ace critter's guvin' 'em 'ots of guff, I kin see thet. Wonder w'at kind o' er steer he's gittin' off?"

But Jack was unable to tell.

"I'd jes' like ter be down thar snug ernough ter hear w'at they're chinnin' erbout," nodded the miner. "But I will 'low I'm disapp'inted in seein' them hyer."

"Why?"

"It makes me think we've come in ther wrong deerection ter fine ther gal."

"How is that?"

"It's jest like this: Ef Four Ace Frank hed ary say in which way they sh'u'd go, 'tain't hafe likely he'd take 'em right out torruds ther place whar ther gal wuz tuck. Savvy?"

"Yes; but I do not believe he had any say about it."

"Why?"

"He is a stranger in these parts, and he would arouse suspicion by seeming to know too much about the lay of the land."

Plug slapped his thigh.

"Right, lad, right! Your head's putty level, an' thet's er fac! We may be all right, arter all."

"But, see! They seem to be settling down ther for some reason. What do you make of it, Plug?"

The old miner did not reply for several moments, then he said:

"Reckon it's er hold-up fer grub. They've 'spected ter be out er putty good w'ile, an' they've brought chuck frum camp. Now they're goin' ter eat."

"I believe you are right."

"Certain sure. But looker ther 'Frisco critter. W'at's he up ter?"

"Walking away, that's all."

"An' leavin' his hoss with ther others. I dunno jest w'at ter make o' thet. See! He's stopped thar an' is lookin' back. Blame my eyes ef he don't act sneakin'! I believe su'thin's up!"

For a few moments they watched the movements of the gambler without further comment; but of a sudden, Old Plug said:

"Ef I kin git down thar in time ter head him, I'm goin' ter foller thet critter, lad. Ther both o' us can't come; one must look arter ther hosses. Thar's food in ther saddle-bags. Ef I hain't back afore soon, you kin know I've struck ile. Jest keep a level head an' look out fer Number One."

He passed his rifle to Jack, clasped the young man's hand for a moment, then set out at a swinging pace along the brink of the ravine, keeping Four Ace Frank in view as well as possible.

Although so many years had passed over the old miner's head, he seemed as spry and light of foot as a young man in the prime of life. As he hurried along, he watched for a chance to descend into the gorge.

"I'll bet er hoss I'll strike er big streak ef I kin git down thar afore I lose ye, 'Frisco!" he muttered. "You hev bin fillin' them pore fool's ears with some kine o' gaff, but ye hain't g'n 'em straight goods. I kin see thet frum ther way ye act. You know whar ther gal is, an' you are goin' ter warn some o' yer pards thet ther gang frum Jericho is in ther vicinity. That's w'at ye'r at, ye varmint!"

He finally came to a place where he fancied he could reach the level below, and, without hesitation, he attempted the descent. It would have been difficult enough for an acrobat; but Plug did not mind that. From ledge to ledge and rock to rock he made his way, slipping, sliding, springing, where a misstep or a false calculation would mean a fearful plunge to the rocks far below.

"It's git thar, ole man, or bu'st yer b'iler!" he gritted.

At times he could seem to cling and work his way along the almost perpendicular face of the rocky descent. It was wonderful how he succeeded in making the descent in safety—but succeed he did. He drew a deep breath of relief when he had reached the bottom.

"I w'u'dn't keer ter do thet ev'ry day jest fer exercise," he muttered, grimly. "But now ter git sight o' ther card-slinger ergain."

Swiftly, yet with the silence of an Indian, he darted along, his eyes wide open for a glimpse

of the form he was after. He was soon rewarded, but he uttered an exclamation of disgust.

Four Ace Frank was scaling the opposite wall of the gorge from the one Plug had descended.

"Waal, here's more fun fer me, by Judas!"

The old man was uneasy, for he feared Four Ace Frank would give him the slip. He could not begin the ascent till after the gambler had completed it, as that individual might look back at any time and discover he was followed.

"Ef he gits erway from me now, I'll sw'ar!" mumbled the trailer. "Thar's one thing sure: thet place hain't so bad fer gittin' up as t'other wuz fer gittin' down. Thet's in my favor jest er dite."

The gambler was in a hurry, and he soon succeeded in reaching the top. There he paused a moment to look back, and Old Plug crouched low till he turned away.

"Now fer it!" gritted the trailer, as he made a dash.

Never before in all his life had Old Plug Ugly worked as hard as he did in climbing that broken wall. If he had been struggling for his own life he could not have exerted himself to a greater extent. When he reached the top he was gasping like an overdriven horse.

But, fortune favored him. The lay of the land was such that the man he was pursuing could have taken but one course. A faint chuckle came from the miner's lips as he saw this, and, without pausing to regain his breath, he hurried forward.

He had proceeded quite a distance, and was beginning to fear the card-sharp had given him the slip, after all, when he suddenly caught a glimpse of Four Ace Frank's back.

"Oh-ho!" softly laughed the old man. "There you are, my dandy! Waal, hyer's stickin' ter ye like er burr frum this time on. Ef you shake me, you'll be er good one, I'll tell ye thet. You'll yit find Ole Plug Ugly ther wu'st cuss you ever monkeyed with."

With all the skill of a red-skin, he followed the unsuspecting gambler. The sport led his tracker quite a chase, but after the wall of the ravine was passed, there was little danger of Old Plug being thrown off the track. The old man kept a revolver constantly in his hand, for he did not know but Four Ace Frank would suspect he was being dogged and lie in ambush.

"Ef he shoots, I'll git a crack back, 'less his bullet scatters my brains fu'st pop," was the miner's thought.

At times he would lose sight of Frank for a moment or two. There came a time when the gambler disappeared, and was not immediately seen again. The trailer halted in perplexity.

"Now, I'd jest like ter know whar he's gone ter!" he muttered, softly, knitting his forehead. "I dunno jest w'at ter make o' thet. Ef he hed turned ter ther right ur left, I'd seen him arter he passed them bushes. An' t'other side o' ther bushes is er solid wall o' rock. I'm stumped!"

He crouched down and watched the bushes for several seconds, but soon grew impatient.

"Cuss ther luck!" he gritted. "Kin it be I'm goin' ter let thet skunk guv me ther slip right hyer? I don't fancy bein' shock in this yere kind o' er way! It's sure he hain't turned ter ther right ur ther left. Ef I could git beyond them bushes, I might be able ter tell which way he hed gone. But ther gittin' thar's w'at sticks. Ef he's layin' in wait fer me, he kin wipe me out w'ile I'm trottin' 'crost ther open. It's take ther chances ur let 'im slip, so hyer goes."

He advanced toward the bushes. When he came nearer, he made a discovery. They extended quite up to the face of the apparently solid wall of rock.

"Ten ter one they kiver ther entrance ter a cave!" was the thought which flashed through his head. "Ef they do, an' thar's er guard, I'll be in danger o' gittin' myself hurted. But, let her rip, Jerry! Hyer goes nuthin'! Root hog ur die!"

He found something like a path through the bushes, though they were trained to conceal it at the outer edge. Cautiously, he followed it till the wall was reached. There he made a discovery.

Before him was a small hole or cleft. It was not large enough for a man to enter even in a stooping position. If one entered at all, it must be on hands and knees.

"I thought so!" nodded the trailer, a look of satisfaction on his weatherbeaten face. "I've run ther ground-hog inter his hoel, but he's clean fergot ter pull ther hoel in arter him. He's left it stickin' out ez big ez life. Waal, waal! w'at next?"

That was the question.

"I'll be runnin' er powerful big resk ef I go in thar," muttered Plug; "an' I'll be losin' powerful big game ef I don't. This yere's a case o' win ther boodle ur lose yer skelp. My top-knot feels kind o' loose, but I've managed ter keep it on fer er putty good long w'ile. I'm gittin' 'bout ole ernough ter turn toes up ter ther daisies anyhow. Ef I sh'u'd git wiped out now, I'd be only shufflin' off ther bucket er leetle sooner then ez if I waited roun' fer ther Fool Killer ter do ther job. Oh, w'at's ther use o' livin' anyhow ef ye can't hev some fun! I reckon I'll jest kick myself inter this hoel an' see what comes o' it."

He thrust his revolver into its holster and drew a knife,

"The'll be er blamed sight handier in class quarters," he thought.

Placing the knife between his teeth, he dropped on his hands and knees and deliberately crept into the hole. It was an act that none but a brave man would have dared to do.

Slowly he crept along, being obliged to feel his way in the Stygian darkness which quickly enveloped him. For quite a distance he proceeded in that manner.

Suddenly one hand touched nothing but empty air! He drew back a bit, a shudder running over him at the thought of creeping over the brink and falling to an unknown depth.

"Ther bottom seems ter hev drapped clean ont thar," he thought. "Ther hoel may not be more'n two foot deep, an' then erg'in, it may be fifty foot deep. Wish I hed suthin' ter kinder probe round er bit."

He carefully felt of the edge of the hole, but such an inspection revealed little.

"Jest reckon I'll hev ter strike er match," he whispered. "Ef ary galoot's layin' fer me, he'll hev er great chance ter git in his work. Allee samee, hyer goes."

He struck the match. The light thus afforded was not sufficient to show the depth of the opening, but it showed him a stout rope that dangled from a point of rock over his head and fell into the darkness below. The rope was swaying slightly, and that fact caused the daring old man to chuckle with delight.

"Ther critter hain't shook me yit!" was his thought. "He's jest gone down hyer."

The match went out and was dropped. Then Plug stretched forth his hand and grasped the rope, finding it dangled loosely. It was tied full of large knots at a distance of about two feet from each other.

"Great thing this," was the trailer's inward comment. "Bu, I jest don't reckon this is ther reg'ler way o' gittin' inter this den o' dry-lan' pirates. A sorter back-door, most problikely. Bet a muel thar's er man watchin' down thar at ther foot o' this string. Waal, ef thar is, I'll drap straddle o' his neck an' make him think ther hull worl' hes caved in on him. I hain't ther chicken ter back out now. Ef I git inter ther nest without being diskivered, I'll be ap' ter raise some kind o' er ruction 'mong ther imps o' darkness."

Firmly grasping the rope, he swung himself out and began the descent into the darkness, his knife still held between his teeth.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE CAVERN.

SLOWLY the daring old miner let himself down the swaying rope. He had considered the chances and knew he might be going to his doom, yet he did not hesitate. He had sworn friendship to Jack and Little Zoe, and such friendship as his meant any sacrifice or any venture that would aid those to whom he was pledged. He was one of those rugged heroes rarely met and almost always underrated or misunderstood.

He could not tell how far he descended before his feet reached the solid rock; but when that happened, he found himself still in deep darkness and still unchallenged. It was plain the outlaws thought there was little chances of any one, other than those of their own band, ever finding their way into the cave by means of the knotted rope.

"Waal, thus fur ev'rythin' is O. K.," thought Plug, as he paused and listened, still clinging to the rope with one hand. "But w'at's next onter ther programmer? Hyer I am in darkness so thunderin' thick thet it might be cut inter chunks, an' I don't know ary which way ter turn. Ev'rythin' is silent ez ther grave. I can't even hear ther rustle o' er rat. Blowed ef 'tain't kind o' boogerish!"

The silence was oppressive.

"Reckon I'll hev ter strike another match ter tell me which way ter turn. Ef I wuz an owl now, I'd be all right, but ez I hain't—we'll try this."

He lighted the match, and it revealed the fact that he stood at the end of a narrow passage. By stretching out his arms, he could touch either side in places.

"Thar hain't but one way they kin go, an' so thet's ther way I'll travel. It won't do ter be continerally lightin' matches, so I'll hev ter stub erlong in ther dark. I'll problikely fall inter some blamed hoel an' break my derved neck, but I'll hev ter take my chances 'bout thet. Ef I git out erlive, it'll be er holy merry-cle, amen!"

With one hand pressed against the wall, he slowly and noiselessly advanced, the knife now grasped in the other hand. If he should suddenly and unexpectedly come upon one of the Land Sharks, he intended to use the keen blade swiftly and effectively, for he knew such a collision would mean the death of one of them.

"They'd better keep clear o' ther ole man ef they want ter continer ter prepare themselves fer lynchin'," he whispered. "I'm in one o' my wu'st states o' mind, an' w'en I feel this yere way, I'm powerful dangerous, you bet!"

He carefully felt his way with his feet, for he did not know but he might come upon another hole and another knotted rope. If such a thing should happen, he had no desire to plunge into the opening and he dashed to death by the fall.

"Slow an' easy duz it now. I've got ther four ace critter hoeled, an' thar hain't no need o'er rush."

At length, he perceived a small ray of light some distance ahead. He paused and gazed at it for a long time, then he once more crept cautiously forward.

As he came nearer to the light, he discovered it shone through a small fissure in the wall. The mumbly sound of voices came faintly to his ears.

He placed his eye to the crack in the wall through which the light shone and found he was looking into a small chamber occupied by four men, one of whom was the gambler whom he had trailed so successfully.

It was with difficulty Old Plug Ugly repressed a chuckle of delight.

"Run ther pesky critter under kiver!" he thought, gleefully. "I didn't make no mistake in sizin' him up! He's ther chief cook an' bottle-washer o' this gang o' p'ison pimps. Wish I hed er few o' ther blamed fools o' Jasper hyer ter take er look at him now. Oh, I'm enter you, Franklin—enter you with both feet!"

The gambler was addressing one of the men, and Plug heard him say:

"Are you sure you understand your part?"

"Sart'in, boss, sart'in."

"And you others?"

"We understand."

"I have no time to explain it to Rule and Sam. You will have to do that."

"Trust it ter us, boss."

"All right. You say the girl was apparently sleeping when you came away, Dave? Well, let me have your coat, hat and mask. Then you must go with me to the passage to help me carry out the part I will play."

Dividend Dave passed over the things asked for, and Four Ace Frank put them on.

"Now I am ready," he said. "Be sure the light is all right, boys, and spring it on us at exactly the right time. Don't bungle this affair. Come on, Dave."

He turned and left the chamber, followed by Dividend Dave.

"Now w'at in ther name o' sin are them critters up ter?" was Old Plug's inward inquiry. "Some crooked game, I'll bet er boss. Anyhow, I'm sart'in ther gal's hyer. I'll hev ter find her some way. Wish I c'd foller Four Aces an' t'other galoot, fer they'd take me ter her, I reckon. Ole man, you're gittin' things down ter er mighty fine point, an' less these critters straddle ye unexpected-like, I low ye'll be able ter guv 'em suthin' they hain't lookin' fer."

Once more he moved onward. After a time he came into a chamber of considerable size, although in the darkness he did not discover this. But he understood he was at the mouth of the passage, and he halted.

"Ef I leave this passage," he thought, "I may never be able ter fine it erg'in; an', ef I can't fine it, won't I be stumped fer gittin' out o' this yere place? I sw'ar, I dunno jest w'at ter do! I might slide right out o' hyer now an' bring ther gang frum Jericho down inter ther hoel. In ther way, we'd take ther varmints by surprise an' wipe 'em out. But I'm blowed ef I jest like ther idee o' callin on any o' ther crowd as bucked erg'in ther lad an' tuck sides with er coyote o' er stranger. Ther galls me. I said we'd go it erlone without any o' their aid, an' I reckon we'll stick by it. I'm hyer now, an' I'm goin' ter snoop roun' er leetle longer. I may be lucky enough ter git a chance ter scoop ther gal right outer ther han's an' not hev any help from nobody."

He moved forward again and soon heard low voices muttering in the darkness of the great chamber. He paused and listened. There were plainly several men, but they were speaking so low he could not hear a word they were saying. Pretty soon they ceased speaking at all, and darkness and silence reigned in the mountain cave.

Old Plug did not dare advance further, for he felt sure there were two or more men at no very great distance. Why they were there he could not tell, but he remained quiet and awaited developments.

"I smell game o' some kind," was his inward comment. "Derned ef I know w'at it is, but suthin' 's up! Them critters hain't keepin' so still fer nuthin', I'll bet er boss. P'raps I'll fine out w'at it is ef I jest hole myself stiddy fer two or three shakes. I dunno ez thar's any reason w'y I sh'd be in er 'tarnal rush erbout now."

The time dragged rather slowly, but the old miner had the patience of an Indian. He remained quite motionless, waiting, waiting.

Suddenly a startling thing occurred. A bright light flashed out, and what it revealed caused Old Plug Ugly to utter an exclamation of surprise, despite himself.

Hand in hand, Little Zoe and the masked Four Ace Frank had been passing along through the chamber when the light was turned upon them. The daring villain who was at-

tempting to successfully play a double game swung the girl behind him and snatched out a revolver.

Old Plug's cry of amazement was fortunately drowned by the shouts which came from the lips of Captain Shark's satellites as they leaped forward for the bogus attack.

"Great thutteration, amen!" spluttered the veteran of the mines. "Now ther Old Boy hes bruck loose fer sart'in! W'at in blue blazes duz ther mean, anyhow?"

There was but one shot, then the struggling mass closed in. To and fro they swayed, the cavern chamber echoing with their savage cries.

"Darn my ole eyes!" gritted Plug. "Thet looks like ther ginowine stuff, blamed ef it don't! Ef thet's business, I'd like ter take er han'. It'd jest do my ole soul good ter git right inter ther middle o' thet scrimmage an' slash round fer all I'm wu'th!"

It was not prudence that restrained the old man, but his natural common sense seemed to tell him there was something wrong about the struggle he was witnessing. He remembered the conversation he had heard between Four Ace Frank and the other Sharks, and he shook his head, deciding:

"Thet hain't straight. It jest sets my blood ter tinglin' like ther reg'ler article, but 'tain't straight. Thar's double play hyer. But Leetle Zoe—"

His eyes rested on the girl, who had fallen back against the cavern wall and was watching the struggle with dilated eyes. It was with great difficulty he restrained the impulse which prompted him to rush to her side and defy the whole dastardly band of kidnappers.

"It's er mighty good thing ther boy hain't with me now," he thought. "Jack jest c'dn't keep still arter seein' her. He'd rush in thar, an' I'd hev ter foller. Ten chances ter one we'd never git er peep o' daylight erg'in."

The struggling men swayed into the darkness beyond the line of light, and Old Plug saw that Zoe was left quite alone for a moment. A desperate resolve seized him, and he darted swiftly and noiselessly toward the girl, thinking if he could hurry her out of the light, there might be a chance of giving the mountain desperadoes the slip in the darkness of the great cave while they were enacting the sham battle.

But, he was not destined to reach Zoe, just then. A burly man appeared at her side and conducted her away into the darkness. Plug stopped, giving vent to a low curse.

"Jig's up fer this time," he muttered, regretfully. "I'll hev ter watch fer another chance. Wish I c'd foller them."

This he tried to do, and the act nearly resulted in his exposure to the outlaws, who ceased struggling as soon as the girl was gone. The old miner sunk to the ground, crouching behind a large boulder, and was unseen for the time.

"Ef they stub up erg'in me, they'll wish they hadn't!" was his silent observation, as he gripped his self-acting revolver. "I'll blow some o' 'em ter Kingdom Come afore they know w'at's ther matter with Hanner, or I'm er liar frum Fibtown! It'll be wuss then as if they'd kicked er can o' dymonite, an' they kin bet their shirts on thet!"

But, fortune still favored the daring old fellow. He remained unseen, hearing Four Ace Frank say, approvingly:

"You did well, boys! The game worked finely! I reckon I will have to get in a little more work, and then, if Miss Zoe does not believe me a saint and Jack Howard one of Satan's imps, I'll give up that I do not know my gait."

He walked past the boulder behind which the old miner was concealed, and, as he did so, Plug could have reached out his hand and touched the leg of the prince of mountain desperadoes.

"Go on, rot yer skin!" was the imprecation which flashed through the old spy's head. "I could cash your chips fer ye right now, but I reckon it'd be robbin' ther halter. Thar's er rope waitin' fer ye, an' ye're boun' ter stretch it sooner or later."

The other men moved away at that moment, and Plug was able to follow Four Ace Frank, a thing which the gambler's footfalls made easy. Like a creeping cat, the mountain veteran glided through the darkness of the cave, keeping in the tracks of the man he now despised and hated to the full scope of his honest soul.

Old Plug Ugly followed the gambler into the passage that led to the small chamber where Little Zoe was confined. Crouching in the darkness, he heard the same conversation which the girl overheard—a conversation that was especially intended for her ears. The old man was a little startled at first.

"Blow me deef!" he mentally exclaimed. "Jigger my gizzard! Ef I didn't know better, I'd say thet wuz Jack Howard's voice. But, ye see, I jest know better, an' thet settles it! Thet card-sharp's voice duz soun' some like Jack's at any time, an' jes' now he's amplifyin' it so nary blamed soul c'd tell ther difference. He's er double-an'-twisted sinner frum Sin Hole, amen! An' all this stuff's bein' gone through with jest ter fool ther leetle gal. Ef I ever see her afore I pass in my checks, I'll tell her some things thet'll s'prise her, you bet your socks!"

When Four Ace Frank passed back along the passage, leaving the man on guard, Old Plug squeezed himself into a break in the wall. The gambler actually brushed against his bitterest enemy there in the darkness and passed on without dreaming how close to death he had been.

"Ef he'd diskivered me, I'd hed ter guv him ther knife, though I don't take ter thet kind o' work any too much. But I'm lookin' out fer number one jest now. Ter save my precious cle top-knot, I'd be injuced ter knife ther hull measly gang."

The old miner was at a loss what to do. He was strongly tempted to creep up on the guard and overpower him, then make a desperate attempt to get Zoe out of the cave. But his natural caution forbade such a move, just then. He knew that it would be a most difficult thing to get Zoe out by means of the knotted rope, for he would be forced to tie it around her waist and draw her up. This would not be so very hard if he could stand up in the passage at the upper end of the opening, but the roof was so low he would not be able to do so.

"Thet won't work. I'll hev ter find ther other entrance some way, then play my keerds fer all they are wu'th. But I heard ther four ace critter say suthin' 'bout sendin' another man ter help keep watch over ther leetle gal. I reckon I'd best be gittin' out o' this afore he comes."

He got out none too soon, for he barely escaped meeting one of the outlaws at the mouth of the passage. In the darkness, it was not a difficult thing to escape detection. The Sharks seemed perfectly familiar with the cavern, judging by the manner in which they moved about without lights.

Plug sat down on a boulder not far from the mouth of the passage that led to the chamber where Zoe was confined. There in the blank darkness, he pondered for a long time, vainly trying to decide what was the best thing to do next.

Suddenly he was startled by a wild outburst of yells and the sound of pistol-shots.

"Great thunder!" he gasped, springing to his feet. "W'at's bruck loose now, may I inquire?"

CHAPTER XX.

A SHOT FROM THE WALL.

"Soun's like ther Ole Boy wuz bavin' er gineral jubilee out thar," muttered the old miner. "Hear 'em squawk! An' hear ther shootin'! Great jimcracks! W'at er confounded racket they are hatchin' up! Soun's almost like a leetle war."

Gradually the noises grew fainter and fainter, as if they were dying out in the distance.

Suddenly Old Plug heard the sound of footsteps in the passage close at hand.

"One o' ther guards, I reckon," he thought, shrinking back and crouching down.

He was right; it was the guard who made a pretense of going to investigate the meaning of the shouts and shots. But the man halted at the mouth of the passage, muttering loud enough for the old miner to hear:

"Ther cap'n's full o' tricks. He must be a heap bad stuck on ther gal ter go ter so much trouble. I don't see ther good of it, hanged ef I do! He's got her, and got her fast; w'at more duz he want? But he hain't satisfied. He wants ter make her think he's er leetle angel in ther skin o' er common critter an' thet Jack Howard's er devil makin' up as er human. An' I reckon he'll succeed in his game, too."

"In er ram's horn, he will!" thought Old Plug. "He may fool Leetle Zoe fer er time, but he's boun' ter git razzooed in ther eend. It most generally works thet way, an' I low it don't pay ter be er villain."

The outlaw-guard went on:

"Now thet's some more o' ther cap'n's work. I'm ter go back an' say as how he's bruck loose an' 's tryin' ter 'scape, an' I'm ter be derned p'ticler ter hev the gal hear me. Wonder w'at he'll be up to next?"

"He'll be up to ther limb o' er tree, tied thar by ther neck," silently grinned the daring miner. "I don't want no more fun then ter git er chance ter pull-at ther rope."

After a few moments, the man turned back into the passage.

"Wal," muttered Plug, "thet guvs me ther p'int o' thet game, bless my thunderin' good luck. Now, I reckon I'll jest nose round er bit an' see ef I can't find ther front door ter this yere hoel in ther groun'."

For more than an hour he wandered, or rather crept, slowly and cautiously around in the cave, but he failed to find that for which he was seeking. If he had dared light matches now and then, he might possibly have been more successful.

"Blame my old hide!" was his final whispered exclamation. "I dunno as I shell be able ter fine my way out o' hyer same as I kem in. I dunno t'other from which way, an' it's ez still ez Sunday in Vermont. Be I lost?"

The thought was startling, in the least.

"Now, w'u'dn't thet be a great go," he muttered, speaking louder than he was aware. "Ef I am, I sw'ar I shell be so 'shamed I'll be inclined ter flop down an' guv up ther ghost without tryin' ter dig my way out!"

After a time he took the risk of lighting a match. By the aid of this, he was able to discover he was in a large passage.

"This mus' lead somewhar," muttered the veteran. "I'll follow it, ef it takes me ter ther lower regions."

But he did not follow it far. Of a sudden a twinkling light appeared some distance ahead, causing him to halt and watch it with curiosity. He soon discovered it was approaching.

"Some blamed galoot comin'!" he softly exclaimed. "Yes, by Moses! thar's two—no, three! Old man, it's time you wuz gittin' back whar you kin lay low."

He deliberately retreated along the passage, taking care not to make a noise that would be heard by the approaching men. In this manner he was driven back into the great chamber, where he sought concealment behind a bowlder, and waited the approach of the men with the light.

They soon appeared, and it was with great difficulty Old Plug choked back the exclamation of surprise that leaped to his lips.

Two of the men were masked outlaws. The third, the man between them, was a prisoner, his hands being bound behind him.

It was Blind Tom Bent!

The three passed on, and the old miner arose to follow them.

"Roast my ole shins! Things are gittin' complicated, you bet yer last snack! Ole Bent's tooken er tumble inter ther kittle, banged ef he hain't! Wonder w'at they'll do with him? I'll jest snoop erlong an' see."

He was forced to follow the men at a considerable distance, and he breathed an exclamation of dismay as the light was suddenly extinguished. Just why this happened he never knew, but he heard the men muttering in the darkness. Then the muttering ceased, and all was still.

"Dished, ur I'm er Digger Injun!" thought Plug. "They've giv me ther slip, but I don't 'low they s'pected they wuz follered. It wuz jest er happen-tance. I'll hev ter try ter fine whar they hev tooken Blind Tom."

It seemed like an aimless search in the darkness, but at length he was rewarded by seeing the faint gleam of a light. Cautiously he made his way forward, to finally discover the light shine through the break in the wall where he had looked in upon Four Ace Frank and his satellites when he first entered the cave. In a few moments he was again peering through the opening, and listening to the voices of the men within the chamber.

Captain Shark was there, his face being covered by a mask. He was speaking:

"Well, this is quite a catch!" he declared, imitating Jack Howard's voice. "So the poor old blind fool walked straight into your clutches?"

"Thet's w'at," nodded one of the men who had brought in the blind captive. "He seems ter be out of his head. I reckon he must hev wandered away from ther others as you say he wuz with."

Blind Bent turned his sightless eyes toward the masked chief of the mountain league.

"Hal hal hal!" he laughed, chillingly. "I am a poor old blind fool—a poor old blind fool! Thet's w'at you say, Jack Howard. And you have the old fool—you have him fast! Hal hal ha!"

"Clean daft erg'in," thought the man behind the wall. "Waal, I dunno's I wonder. He's hed trouble ernough, Bent has."

"Yes, I have you, Tom Bent," was Captain Shark's retort; "and I also have your daughter. She is to be mine in spite of everything."

"Yours—yours—yours!" mumbled the blind man. "My daughter! It's Little Zoe you are speaking of—my Little Zoe?"

"Thet's who it is, old man."

"A good girl. She is to be yours! And I thought you fit to mate with her one time. But now—you devil!"

The final words burst from his lips in a manner that gave the cool-nerved chief of the outlaws a start.

"If I was free," continued Bent—"If I was free and had my hands at your throat, I'd never take them off till you lay dead at my feet!"

"But, you see, you are not free."

"No, I do not see. I am blind, blind, blind! I cannot see! All is blank darkness before me! Oh, for one more glimpse of the blessed sunlight of heaven! And you would rob the blind man of his child! You heartless villain!"

"You once seemed willing for me to have her."

"That was when I believed you an honest man, Jack Howard; but since then I have learned the dark secret of your dastard's heart! You would blight the life of my pure darling! You would ruin her!"

Captain Shark laughed tauntingly.

"And you cannot prevent it, old man," he sneered.

A look of indescribable fury transformed the blind man's face. His breathing was like sharp puffs of steam. He struggled savagely with the cords which held his hands.

"Hal hal!" tauntingly laughed the chief of the Sharks. "It is useles for you to try to break them, Bent; you cannot do it, you know."

The blind father paused a moment and turned his sightless eyes upward, crying loudly:

"God in Heaven, pity my innocent child! Give me strength—give me strength!"

Once more he strained at the cords—and they parted like tow strings.

With a hoarse shout, Blind Bent leaped toward Captain Shark, and by a stroke of fortune, seized him by the throat.

"Now, devil, you die!" he shouted, exultantly.

"Shoot the fool—knife him! Quick, or—g-g-grr-grr!"

The chief's command ended in a horrible gurgle, as Bent's iron fingers closed upon his windpipe.

Quick to obey the command of his master, Black Rule snatched out a long knife and flung himself at Tom Bent's back. The knife was raised, and in another moment it would have been sheathed in the blind man's body.

Out from the chamber wall leaped a red spout of flame! The report of a heavy revolver sounded at the same instant!

The murderous negro flung up his hands, dropped the knife, reeled back and fell heavily to the ground, death-stricken—a bullet in his brain!

CHAPTER XXI.

WITH A ROPE AROUND HIS NECK.

JACK HOWARD watched Old Plug Ugly till his faithful miner friend disappeared from view.

"As noble an old man as ever drew breath," muttered Jack. "Rough, uncouth, unlettered though he is, he possesses a soul that is not misshapen like his face and form. He is true blue and a friend to cherish. He has sworn to stand by me through thick and thin, and he will do so. There is one person in this part of the country on whom I can depend, thank God!"

He turned back from the verge of the gorge and looked after the horses, making them secure in such a manner that they could graze on the rich grass which happened to grow luxuriantly at that point.

"There is no telling how long it will be before Plug returns," he said, aloud. "I may have to wait an hour, and I may have to wait a day. If it is the longer time, I fear I shall grow impatient."

"Poor Little Zoe! How that scheming Frenchwoman has deceived her and her sightless father! Oh, Antoinette is shrewd, but it is the shrewdness of a serpent! I wonder how I was ever deceived by that woman! She is much older than I, that is sure. But she can be fascinating when she tries, I know that, for has she not had some of the highest blood of Paris at her feet? Her smile is something wonderful, though her face in repose may not be beautiful."

"But it seems a strange thing she should be here in this country after these years. What can have brought her here? Is it possible she has been searching for me all the while to avenge the death of Walter Warwick? The thought is startling, and yet it seems reasonable. She is a woman capable of such an act, and she has successfully begun the work of vengeance. The question is: Will she be able to carry it through to the end? If so, I shall be crushed and ruined. Then, without a doubt, she means to kill me. But she shall not succeed!"

"I'm not a man to be easily crushed, as my enemies will find. I have foes enough besides Antoinette who are working against me, but the time will come when, with Old Plug Ugly's aid, I will turn the tables upon them. The Land Sharks could not have made a greater mistake than in striking at me through Zoe, for such a blow has aroused all the fury of my nature. I am now determined to know no rest till the last man of that wretched band has met his just deserts. When that is accomplished I shall be safe from them, but not till then. For the sake of revenge, if any of them remain alive, they would follow me anywhere."

"Far from this wild land, in a quiet little home, Zoe and I will be happy yet. Her father shall realize how he has been deceived, and then he will be only too regretful for the way he turned against me. But he may not live. The excitement he is passing through may be too much for him, as his brain is now nearly unbalanced. His wild spells attest that. He has been most unfortunate, poor man!"

Jack returned to the brink of the gorge and threw himself down in a reclining position where he could watch the party far below.

"They little dream I am up here where I can look down on them," he laughed, somewhat bitterly. "If they did—" He completed the sentence with a gesture.

Jack was restless, for he could not help thinking of the peril Little Zoe might be in, but he felt as if his old miner friend had wished him to remain inactive till he returned.

For nearly two hours Jack watched the party in the gorge. They seemed to be awaiting the return of Four Ace Frank, whose absence must have been unaccountable.

At length, Jack was attracted by the queer actions of one of the men. He was running around excitedly, striking his hands together and shouting, his cries coming to the ears of the watcher far above.

"It's Bent!" exclaimed Jack. "The man is having a regular crazy spell, and they do not seem able to do any thing with him."

It was plain the blind man's companions were trying to quiet him, but were having very poor success.

"He will get away from them yet and go ranging around over the country of his own accord, as he did when Zoe was captured by the Sharks before. It was a wonderful thing how the man escaped death that time, and if he tries it again, he will be pretty sure to destroy himself. It would be better to tie him hand and foot than to let him get away."

For some time the excitement in the gorge continued, and then Jack uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"There he goes!" he cried, leaping to his feet. "I thought he would do it!"

Like a frightened deer, the blind man was running from his friends, several of whom were doing their best to overtake him.

"He will get away from them all!" exclaimed Jack, excitedly rushing along the verge of the gorge in order to keep the race in view.

At times Bent would stumble and fall, and he never seemed to be injured, for he instantly sprung up and raced on again as madly as ever, making the gorge ring with his wild shouts.

Jack little realized how far the chase was leading him. He was an excellent runner, and by rare good fortune, he found a clear road where he was almost constantly in plain view of the deranged fugitive below.

One by one, Bent's pursuers were winded and forced to give up the chase or fall into a walk, till, at length, the last one did so. Still the blind man dashed onward.

"If I were only down there now," panted Jack, "I half-believe I could hold my own with him and possibly overtake him in the end. I might be able to save him from self-destruction. I wonder if there will not be a way for me to get down?"

As he ran, he watched for a chance to descend. At length, he reached a spot which seemed favorable.

"I'll try it," he muttered, determinedly. "Bent will get a start on me, but it is the only chance. He may stop to rest soon."

With considerable difficulty, he succeeded in reaching the bottom of the gorge, but Blind Bent had disappeared long before he did so. Still the young man did not give up the chase.

"Now I am down here, I am going to hang to it a little longer. It would be foolish to give it up now."

But, before long, he discovered Tom Bent had quite given him the slip, for he reached a point where the blind man might have taken his choice of three courses, and it was impossible for Jack to tell which was the one selected.

He sat down, discouraged.

"I shall have to give it up at last," he muttered; "and I have my doubts about ever seeing Tom Bent alive again. There is little chance for a blind man to wander through this wild section and not meet destruction. This will be another terrible blow for poor Zoe. I do not know as she will bear up under it. Zoe! I may never see her again! We may be separated forever! No, no! I will not—I cannot believe that! Fate will not be so cruel."

He remained musing for a considerable time. At length, he started up and listened. The distant ring of horses' iron-shod feet came to his ears.

"Some one is coming!" he exclaimed. "Ten to one it is foes, for I have not many friends now! What shall I do?"

He looked around for a place of concealment, but in vain. The barren rocky walls refused to hide him.

"It's face them!" came through his clinched teeth, as he drew his revolvers. "They shall find Rattling Jack a hard man to down, if they try to jump me."

And so he awaited the appearance of the riders.

A few seconds later, two horses appeared, and an exclamation broke from Jack's lips as he saw the rider of one of them.

It was Antoinette!

Standing with his weapons clinched in his hands, the young man awaited their approach.

The French siren's companion was a rough-looking man.

"Ten to one he is one of the new band of Land Sharks!" was Jack's thought. "If so, it must be he is conducting her to the retreat of the kidnappers."

Plainly, Antoinette was surprised at seeing Jack there alone. She drew rein directly in front of him, a few feet away, a sneering expression on her face.

"And so eet is Monsieur Harree," she bowed, mockingly. "He do wait wiz bees revolvers in bees hands. He do seem like one highwayman."

The man also drew rein, scowling blackly at Jack.

"Yes, it is I," retorted the young man. "But, why are you here, woman?"

"What eef I do not answer zat question?"

"I will answer it for you."

"Zen let me hear you do so. You must be vera wise to do zat."

"You are mistaken. It takes but a small amount of wisdom to tell where you are bound."

"Zen tell eet—tell eet!"

"You are on your way to the retrcat of that infamous band of mountain desperadoes and girl-stealers known as the Land Sharks."

"Oh-o! you have make ze grand mistake! You are not so vera sharp as you t'ink, monsieur."

"I have made no mistake."

"Zat is impolite, for you do contradic' ze lady. You deed not use to do zat way, Harree."

He made a gesture that expressed impatience, not to say disgust.

"I wish you would cease to speak that name! I hate it!"

"Eet is vera prit-tee."

"It is offensive as coming from *your* lips!"

"Steel you use to like to hear me speak eet. Zen you love to hear me whisper eet in your ear, ha, ha! Oh, Harree, Harree! how you have changed!"

She dropped her voice suddenly to a tone of sad sentimentality, which she well knew cut him keenly.

"Go on!" he cried, with a sudden outburst. "Go on! I dare not speak with you longer! I shall forget myself, and I have weapons in my hands."

"Oh, you seem in one great hurry to geet rid of us! We are in no great hurry to go. We deed not expect to see you heer, but now we have meet, we feel like talking. How is eet you are here?"

"That is nothing to you."

"Oh, Harree! can eet be you haf complete forgot your manner? Eet do seem zat way."

"I'll make him eat his talk, if you say so, miss," asserted Antoinette's companion.

"Oh, no, monsieur!" she smiled. "You weel favor me by not having trouble wiz heem. He is one vera bad man, for he do keel one friend of mine."

"I don't keer a dern for that!" retorted the man. "If you said so, I'd tackle a dozen just like him."

"You are vera good, but eet is not necessary. You are one brave man, but I do not want ze trouble."

Jack laughed, scornfully.

"And so you have found another dupe! You still know how to work your arts, sorceress! I pity the man who falls into your clutches!"

She smiled.

"Zey do not all t'ink as you, Monsieur Weel-son. You haf ze face to insult me now; prit-tee soon I haf you where you will beg."

"Never!"

"You say nevar, but you do not know Antoinette yet."

"I know enough of her!"

"You s'all know more before she is done wiz you."

"God forbid!"

"You haf show der your scorn. Vera well! Ze time weel come when you s'all cringe like ze dog at her feet."

"Again I say *never*!"

"Eet s'all! Zen Antoinette will laugh at you—zen she will put her foot on your neck!"

"You hope to crush me, and at the start you have been successful; but there is a God above who will see that justice triumphs in the end. He will not allow you to destroy the spotless soul of an innocent girl!"

"Zat do soun' vera fine, but—poof!—eet is all wind. What do I care for ze God you speak of? What do He care for me and what I do? Not'ing. I haf hear people talk like zat before, but eet do not frightun me."

"Woman, do you dare the Almighty?"

"I dare *anything*!"

Antoinette's companion looked at her in admiration, muttering:

"Holy smoke! but she's a dandy! I'd go through fire and water and face the devil himself for that woman!"

He was under the spell of her strange and unfathomable fascination.

Jack Howard half turned away, but wheeled back, crying:

"I would you were a man! Then I could meet you fairly. As it is, I am handicapped."

Antoinette laughed.

"Oh, yes; I have ze advantage, and I am shrewd enough to keep eet. I know on ze wheech side my bread haf ze butter. Now, I tell you somet'ing zat make you creenge: I am going to see zat leetle girl zat you love better zan me. I weel make her t'ink you are ze devil's imp. How you like zat? Hal ha!"

Jack's face turned white and he trembled in every limb. In a moment, however, he controlled his voice, replying steadily:

"You have already succeeded in making her think I am as black as I know your own heart to be; you cannot do further harm."

"Oh, monsieur! I make her double sure of eet. You do not know my tongue."

"I know too much of it!"

"You haf come out here to rescue ze leetle girl; but zat you can nevar do. She is where you can nevar find her, no matter how hard you try. Bimeby, I haf you where I can see you diel. Zat will be revenge for Monsieur War-week."

"I do not fear you."

"Prit-tee soon you will."

"You delude yourself by thinking so."

"Well, monsieur, I can spend no longer time wiz you."

"For which I am sincerely glad. I am only too willing to part with you."

Her face darkened.

"You steel continue wiz ze insults."

"Nothing could insult *you*!"

A cry came from her lips, she touched the horse with her whip, and as the animal sprung forward, she bent in the saddle a bit. *Swish!* The whip cut through the air and left its mark upon Jack Howard's face, but brought no cry of pain or surprise from his lips.

"Zat is for you to remember me, Harree," she called back over her shoulder, as the horse bore her away, her companion at her side. "*Au revoir, mon cher!*"

He stood silently watching her till she disappeared from view, and the hoofbeats of the horses died away in the distance.

"Go on!" came hoarsely from his lips, at length. "The day of your disaster is not far away! You may defy God and man, but you shall not escape a just retribution in the end!"

He thrust his revolvers into their accustomed places and turned to retrace his steps.

"I must go back to the horses. Old Plug Ugly may be there now, and he will wonder at my absence. I wish I had been able to follow that woman, for she would have led me to my darling. But it will all come out right in the end—it *must*!"

He walked slowly along with downcast eyes, taking little heed of his surroundings. He was deeply buried in thought.

"Halt thar!"

At the rough command he came to a stop and looked up in amazement.

Half a dozen men confronted him, their weapons being turned full upon him. A cry of amazement broke from their lips as he lifted his head.

"It's Rattling Jack!"

They were a number of the men from Jericho who had been in pursuit of Blind Bent.

"Howlin' Hottentots!" whooped Bad Man Bob, executing a dance of delight. "Haint this yere a stroke of luck! This is ther very critter whose neck we've bin sayin' we'd stretch of we koteched him. Wow! I'm er wolf, an' I smell blood!"

Jack made a motion toward his weapons, but one of the men cried:

"Hold hard, younker! None of thet, or we'll bore ye whar ye stan'!"

"What do you want, gentlemen?"

"Hol hol! Mighty civil all ter oncet, haint hel! *Gentlemen!* Excuse us! No taffy, please!"

"Want?" squawked the Bad Man, half crouching, with his hands on his knees. "We want you, critter; an' by ther head of ole Golier! we'll hev yel! You're er gal-stealin' pirate frum 'Way Back, burn yer hide!"

"Say, you dry up!" growled one of the men. "You've got too much jaw, you hev. Let somebody else do ther talkin', will ye, you sawed-off danger-signal?"

Bad Man Bob stared at the speaker in amazement and disgust, and then, with an injured air, he subsided for the time.

"I'll bet Jack Howard's seen Tom Bent," said one.

"Ef he hes, we'll never see Bent ergain," put in another.

"You bet thet's right."

"Wal, we've got business with ther critter, anyhow."

"An' mighty *pressin'* business."

"The sooner it's 'tended to ther better."

As the party started toward Jack he threw up one hand with a gesture of command, crying sharply:

"Hold hard, there!"

There was something about the command that brought the men to an instant halt.

"Don't crowd me," warned Jack. "If you mean fair play, keep your distance; if not—" He ended abruptly, with a significant gesture.

"It can't be you'd make a fool of yerself by tryin' ter buck erg'in' this crowd?"

"Desperate men will do desperate things. I stand ready to fight for my life."

"Ef you held ther drop ther way ye did this mornin', it'd be differunt; but we hev ye foul."

"That is the way it looks," admitted Jack, coolly; "but appearances are sometimes deceptive."

"He's playin' fer time by ebinnin'," growled one of the crowd. "It's durned likely some of his pards are putty nigh, an' he's waitin' fer them. Ther sooner we straddle him ther better it'll be."

The others seemed to think so, and a moment later there was a general dash for the young man. In vain he tried to snatch out his weapons; his foes were upon him before he could use them. A single shot was fired, but it came from Bad Man Bob's revolver, the valiant little fire-eater having apparently discharged the weapon by accident in his excitement.

Jack was beaten down, and his hands secured behind his back. Then his foes gave vent to shouts of triumph.

"Thar's er tree back hyer er piece," said one.

"It's er mighty good place ter hang anything up ter dry."

With exultant yells the ruffianly gang dragged their captive back to the tree, fitting the noose of a lariat around his neck as they hurried him along.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY.

FACE to face with a horrible death! Jack Howard stood beneath the tree, the rope which encircled his neck having been passed over the limb above.

"Swing him up!"

"Wipe ther critter out!"

"Don't stop fer palaver!"

The cries were appalling. Jack's face became very pale, but he was unshaken.

"Go on with your dastardly work!" he gritted. "You will be murderers in the sight of God!"

"Hold hard, pards!" cried Bad Man Bob, stepping forward at this juncture. "It's best ter guv ther critter er chance ter confess."

"Thet's so."

"Chain up er bit!"

"Make him peach!"

"Make him tell whar ther gal is!"

"Thet's right," nodded the Bad Man, with evident satisfaction. "Now you're comin' ter yer senses. We kin git er heap of information outer him ef we only tries. Woof! I'm ther beaucheful lad ter do ther squeezein' act."

"Oh, you stan' back!"

"W'at, me?"

"Yep, you."

"Wow! Be keerful; I'm er wolf! I tell ye I'm mighty danger'us!"

But he was thrust unceremoniously aside, the largest man of the crowd stepping before the young fellow whose neck was encircled by the rope.

"Looker hyer," said the big man, holding up one finger and shaking it beneath Jack's nose, "will ye peach?"

"I have nothing to tell."

"Hyar, hyer! be keerful, boy! We knows yer record, you bet, an' it's er tough one fer one of your years. This is yer las' chance ter do ther white thing afore ye shuffle off this yere mortal coil. Talk lively an' straight."

"You men are deceiving yourselves," declared Jack, calmly and firmly. "I am not what you suppose."

"Oh, it's too late fer that kind of whitewash. We don't keer fer it, an' Ole Plug Ugly haint hyer ter take yer part. Spit it out straight."

"It is useless to tell you the truth, for you will not not believe me. You have taken the word of a blind man and a gambler, and what I say will make no difference at all."

"We don't want ye ter plead innocence, fer we know better'n thet. You'll be denyin' you ever belonged ter ther Lan' Sharks yit!"

"I do not deny that. I was forced to become a member of the wretched band some time ago, but when I found out what they were, I improved the first opportunity to leave them."

"Turned traitor!" sneered a voice.

Jack's face flushed despite his situation.

"In no way than in refusing to have anything further to do with them did I turn traitor," he replied. "Had they let me alone, I would never have troubled them again. But they would not let me alone."

"That's moonshine! I reckon you hed er grudge erg'in' ther old chief an' wanted ter git him outer ther way. You succeeded in thet, an' then you became chief of ther new band, as you had planned."

"It is false!"

"It's all well ernough ter say thet, but things show up erg'in'st ye."

"As I said, it is useless for me to tell you the truth; you will not believe me."

"Will you tell whar you hev hed ther leetle gal carried?"

"I have not had her carried anywhere."

"Oh, string him up! W'at's ther use of wastin' time!"

"Hole on! hole on!" spluttered Bad Man Bob, once more. "Don't make 'tarnal fools of yerselves! Ef we kin git ther truth outer him, w'y hedn't we better?"

But again the Bad Man was thrust aside.

"Last time," announced the big man, looking Jack in the eyes. "Will ye confess?"

"I have nothing to confess."

"H'ist him, boys! H'ist him on ther—"

At this moment there was a perfect fusilade of pistol-shots close at hand, accompanied by a yelling and whooping that thoroughly frightened every man.

"It's ther critter's frien's!" howled Bad Man Bob, as, with lowered head, he butted his way into the throng, scattering them to the right and left. "Skoot, ye sinners, skoot! They're right outer us, er hull hill-roarin' leetle millyon of 'em! Wow-yow-ker-wow-wow! Git like ye wuz sent fer!"

A perfect stampede was created, the men not even pausing to look around for the supposed foe.

Jack Howard felt something touch his hands, and in another moment they were free.

"Now's yer time ter slide, young feller!" hissed the Bad Man at his side. "Git fer all yer

wu'th, an' don't stop gittin' tell ye are clean outer ther way! No time fer chin! Hump yerself, you sucker! *Wow!*"

Jack only paused to cast the noose from his neck, then he obeyed the little fire-eater's advice, having no time to thank him for setting him free or to wonder why Bob had done so.

Before the young man's foes could recover themselves, he had obtained a good start. Then, as they discovered they were not attacked, they started in pursuit, giving vent to yells of fury.

"Shout away!" thought Jack, as he dashed along. "I am free from you now, and I defy you to overtake me."

Being such a splendid runner, he would soon have distanced them had not an accident happened. He stepped on a loose stone, turned his ankle and fell. His fall was greeted by shouts of delight from those in pursuit.

Jack instantly sprung up, but he discovered he had sprained his ankle slightly, causing him to limp somewhat. His foes saw this, for their cries of satisfaction continued.

"I will slip you yet!" gritted the fugitive.

He led them a long chase, the test of endurance continuing for nearly an hour. But, toward the last, his ankle became worse and worse, and he discovered three of his enemies were gaining on him.

"I reckon I will have to stop and fight it out!" he muttered. "I hate to take the life of one of them, but, if I am forced to do so in self-defense, I will fill all three of them with lead, unless they succeed in filling me first."

He had been running up a rocky defile that grew narrower and more difficult as he ascended, threatening to close on him before long.

"Then I shall be trapped!" he thought.

Suddenly, to his right, he observed a narrow rift that seemed like a big crack in the side of the mountain. Something caused him to thoughtlessly plunge into it. It led upward, and for some time he struggled on, hearing the cries of his relentless enemies not very far behind.

Suddenly a most unexpected thing occurred.

The ground sunk beneath his feet and he found himself falling down, down, almost smothered by a cloud of dust and wrapped in utter darkness. Down, down he went for what seemed an endless distance. He could not breathe; he was stifling; his senses were slipping from him.

Then came a shock and unconsciousness.

How long he lay in a senseless condition it is difficult to say, but when he revived, he found himself half-buried beneath a mass of dirt. All around was blank darkness. He looked upward for the opening through which he had fallen, but not a ray of light gladdened his eyes.

"Great God! where am I?"

His voice sounded hollow and strange, causing his blood to run cold in his veins.

He struggled from beneath the dirt and began creeping slowly about on his hands and knees. He did not dare to move around in any other manner lest he should fall into some fearful pit concealed by the crushing darkness.

How long he crept about in this manner or how far he proceeded he could only surmise. He finally fancied he saw a light. Toward it he moved, to find it was no fancy. The light was really there, but it was not the light of day. Plainly it was an artificial one, produced by some human being.

Hope revived. Eagerly he crept toward the light. In a few moments he was astonished to find himself looking down into a small cavern chamber.

The chamber was occupied by a single person—a girl who had thrown herself despairingly down upon a rude cot in the corner. He recognized her instantly, and a cry of joy and amazement broke from his lips.

It was Zoe!

CHAPTER XXIII.

SHOT FOR SHOT.

FOR several moments after the shot from the cavern wall, by which the giant negro was stricken down in death, the desperadoes of the mountain league seemed frozen with amazement and horror. Captain Shark struggled manly with his blind foe, but slowly and surely grew weaker, his face beginning to grow black and his eyes and tongue protrude.

"My God! ther cap'n's bein' killed!"

As the cry came from the lips of one of the men, by a rare stroke of fortune, the chief managed to tear the clinging fingers of the madman from his throat. Still, although he was an uncommonly powerful man, Captain Shark could not conquer the blind parent who was fired and given such strength and fury as only the deranged ever possess.

"You shall not escape me, devil!" raged Bent, clinging to the leader of the outlaws and trying to get hold of the man's throat once more. "Dastardly wretch that you are, I will yet have your treacherous life!"

"Not—in—hurry!" came brokenly from the lips of the half-strangled man, "I—swear—you are—tough cuss!"

"God gave me strength to burst my bonds, and he will give me strength to lay you dead at my feet!"

The outlaw leader was amazed at the man's power, for never before had he met any one who was his match in a rough-and-tumble struggle. But there is no man who does not find his match at least once in a lifetime, and Captain Shark had found his.

"Knock the old—fool on the—head!" he finally ordered. "That will end this affair."

The men hesitated an instant, for they thought of the fate of their black comrade, who lay dead before their eyes. But, with sudden courage, one of them leaped forward, reversing his heavy revolver in his hand.

Down upon Blind Bent's head came the weapon, and once more he was knocked senseless, as he had been in his own cabin not many hours before.

"Make him fast," commanded Captain Shark, as he caressed his ill-treated throat. "Be sure to fix him so he cannot break loose again. None of such cursed bungling work as was done before!"

His order was swiftly obeyed.

"Who fired that shot?"

No man knew.

"Where did it come from?"

Some one explained that it seemed to leap out from the cavern wall.

"Then the man who fired it must be in the passage beyond. Torches, lads, torches! We will hunt him down, if we have to scour every inch of this cave!"

Several torches were lighted, and, headed by the chief, the men rushed from the chamber, leaving Blind Bent, bound and unconscious, alone in the darkness save for the companionship of the dead negro.

With drawn weapons, the outlaws searched the cave, flashing the light of their torches into dark corners and behind bowlders where an enemy might be hiding, but they found nothing. This filled them with awe and a feeling of mystery.

"Derned ef I kin understan' it!" muttered one.

"Thar's suthin' mighty sing'ler 'bout it," added another.

"Who is ceartun thet the shot came from ther wall?"

"Thet's whar it seemed ter come from."

"Hain't it possibler thet Bent had er gun in his sleeve an' did ther shootin' bisself?"

But this did not seem possible.

"The man who did it has managed to give us the slip some way," acknowledged Captain Shark. "There is only one manner in which he could have gained access to the cave without our knowledge."

"An' thet is by ther rope."

"Right. He must have come in that way, and he has probably departed that way. If so, that entrance is known, and our safety is in danger."

The men looked into each other's eyes in alarm.

"W'at's ter he did, cap'n?"

"The back passage must be blocked by a big bowlder. You, Sam, know where the bowlder is and how to remove the wedges which keep it from rolling into the passage. You will see that the passage is closed so it will be impossible for any one to gain access to the cave without blasting the road."

"All right, boss," replied the short, thick-set outlaw addressed. "Ef I don't come back, ye kin know ther rock hes rolled onder me an' I'm burried tell ther judgment day."

Without further words, he turned away to attend to the blocking of the passage, little dreaming that clinging to a crag-like projection of rock above his head was a man who mentally observed:

"Suthin' 's ap' ter strike ye thet'll make ye think ther Judgment Day's come mighty suddint like. Ef you do block ther passage with ther bowlder, my name hain't Ole Plug Ugly—it's Mud, with a mighty big M."

Captain Shark led the way back to the chamber where the unexpected tragedy had taken place.

"Take care of the stiff, boys," he ordered, motioning toward Black Rule's body. "The nigger was a good man, but he won't be of any further use to us."

The corpse was lifted and carried out.

The chief of the mountain bandits bent over Blind Bent.

"He is still unconscious," muttered Captain Shark; "but it is plain he lives. That blow must have been a settler! My gracious! but he is the worst man I ever tussled with! I began to think my goose was cooked one time. Now he is here, I wonder what we can do with him? I no not care to kill the old fool, though I may find it necessary."

"Things are getting kind of warm, I will admit that. I do not fancy our failure to find the man who shot the nigger. It is apparent that some one has found his way into this cave, and the chances are that that some one is Old Plug Ugly. That man is the only living person in these parts whom I fear. But for him, it would be an easy thing to crush Jack Howard."

"I must make haste to close the game and get out of these parts. And I will take Little Zoe with me! Ha! ha! She is a prize, indeed! She

is nothing but a little young thing, as innocent as the birds, yet, man of many passions though I am, she has found a place in my heart that never before has been touched. I have determined to possess her for all my own, and heaven or hell shall not thwart me!

"What will Antoinette say? What will she do? Bah! What care I what she says or does! I am tired of her. I wonder how I have clung to her so long! She has aided me in my schemes for the filthy lucre, and for that reason I have stood by her even when she made me very weary with her professed love. She is shrewd, and I shall not be able to keep it from her that I really care for this fair young song-bird of the mountains. She thinks now that I only care to injure Jack Howard, but when she knows the truth, she will be raging. I shall have trouble with her. If she makes me too much trouble—well, there was one who tried it before her. She suddenly disappeared and was never afterward heard of. Antoinette should have a care, if she wishes to live to a green old age."

He laughed, and a terribly blood-chilling laugh it was.

For some time he sat musing in silence, but he finally began muttering aloud once more:

"I have succeeded quite well in making Zoe think Jack Howard a villain, but I have not made any advance in securing her affections myself. That is the next thing I shall attempt, and the sooner I am about it the better. I have a scheme which I will proceed to carry into execution as soon as possible. The Sharks shall capture me again and I shall be confined in the chamber with her. There I can work my little game to the pleasure of my heart."

"The poor fools of Jericho will wonder what has become of me. If I have to explain, I will have a fine story about being captured by the Sharks. Oh, the game is all in my fingers, and it cannot possibly turn against me now."

"Next thing is to get into the chamber with my peerless little golden-haired beauty."

A few moments later, several of the men entered the chamber once more.

"I have one more trick for you to aid me in," laughed Captain Shark; "and I fancy this will be the last of its kind."

"We are ready fer anythin', boss."

A feeling of satisfaction ran over the leader of the mountain outlaws as he noted how complete was his control over the rough men of the league.

"The trick is simply this," he went on. "I want you to set up a great shouting as if something that pleased you mightily had happened. Then I want you to tie my hands behind me and conduct me to the chamber where the girl is confined, thrusting me in there as an apparent prisoner. Unless something happens that I am needed outside, you are to let me remain there two hours. If anything happens, you are to remove me on pretense of taking me to another and safer place. Do you understand?"

They declared they did.

A few moments later the trick was carried out. After the shouting, the unmasked chief was conducted to the girl's prison-chamber.

In the darkness of the passage outside the chamber, Frank cried, imitating the voice of Jack Howard:

"Thrust him in there for the present, boys, as we have no other place to put him now. But you must keep a close watch on the slippery rascal, and if he so much as approaches the opening, fill him with bullets."

"We'll do it, captain."

Then Four Ace Frank was unceremoniously pushed into the chamber, staggering forward and falling in apparent helplessness.

"You miserable curs!" he cried, not appearing to notice Little Zoe. "I will be even with you yet!"

"Are you hurt?" asked Zoe, anxiously, for she had been on her feet and had seen him thrust in.

"I think not much," he answered, but his appearance was that of one whose clothes had been nearly torn from his back in a desperate struggle. "But, heavens! have they brought me back here? I knew not where they were taking me, and I little dreamed they would put me in here."

And little Zoe was deceived by the dastardly liar.

"It seems that they have," she said. "Let me release your hands."

He permitted her to do so, but caught her own soft hands in his grasp the moment he was free.

"Bless you!" he said, looking eagerly into her blue eyes. "You are an angel!"

She tried to draw away, but he held her fast.

"I am so sorry you risked your life by attempting to save me!" she said.

"But I am not sorry—I shall not be sorry even though I lose my life for the same reason! Zoe—"

"Hush!" she exclaimed, looking fearfully upward into the darkness. "Did you not hear it?"

"I heard nothing."

"I am sure he is up there."

"Who?"

"Jack—Jack Howard."

Four Ace Frank was startled despite himself. "Oh, no!" he exclaimed. "He cannot be up there!" And then, remembering the game he was playing: "He was at the mouth of the chamber a moment ago."

"Still I am positive he is up there now," replied Zoe, firmly. "I heard him utter a low exclamation a moment ago."

"What has got this foolish fancy into your head?"

"It is no fancy."

"I think it must be."

"I was lying on that cot when I first heard him. He called my name."

"When was that?"

"Not very long ago. A few moments after he did so, I heard a pistol-shot from the cave out there."

Frank knit his brows.

"Did he say anything besides your name?"

"Yes. I sprang up, but could see nothing in the darkness up there. He spoke my name again and said he had found me at last. I was frightened."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Yes."

"What followed?"

"One of the guards heard me and came in to ask if I wanted anything. After that, Jack did not speak again."

"Poor girl!" was the thought which passed through the card-sharp's head. "She has passed through so much excitement that it has affected her head. She is troubled by wild fancies. I must cheer her some way, and I will get her out of this as soon as possible."

Aloud, he said:

"It is possible Jack Howard knows a way of getting up there, but I do not fancy he is there now. I am certain he has other fish to fry."

But Zoe was not easily reassured.

"I am so afraid of him," she declared.

"I only wish I had the wretch in my grasp!" exclaimed the card-sharp. "I would soon terminate his infamous career. He has played a double part, but the people of Jericho have found him out at last. If he falls into their hands, he will meet punishment swift and sure at the end of a rope."

The girl shuddered, and then, with a revulsion of feeling, she murmured:

"Poor Jack!"

She did not see how dark Four Ace Frank's face became as he heard her words.

"The wretch is not worthy of your pity," asserted the 'Frisco sport, forcing himself to speak calmly. "He is a dastard of the deepest dye, who would have ruined your life had not his black career in the past been exposed to you at a fortunate moment."

"I fear you are right."

"You must forget him, and—"

"I cannot! I cannot!"

"You must force yourself to do so. What if one man proves a villain, there are still true men in the world. You have much to live for."

"What is it?"

"Well, you have your father."

"Yes, yes; that is true."

"And, little one, have you not a thought for me?" he whispered, bending his face close to hers.

She started back a bit.

"You!" she exclaimed; "you?"

He went on, hurriedly:

"Yes, of me. It is true I only saw you for the first time a little while ago. You were passing along the street of Jericho when I first saw you. I was strangely attracted, and my heart was stirred by an emotion I had never felt till that moment. I have always laughed at a person falling in love at first sight, yet I now know I loved you, little one, the moment my eyes first rested on your sweet face."

Once more Zoe tried to draw from him, appearing frightened.

"Don't!" she exclaimed, helplessly—"please don't!"

"I cannot help it!" he declared. "I must tell you how much I care for you. Do not repulse me, Zoe! What a pretty name that is! I know I must seem bold and ungentlemanly, but think of our position—"

"Yes, yes! think of that! This is no time to speak of such things!"

But he was not to be baffled.

"It may be the last time I shall ever have. If I am to be slain by Jack Howard and his dastardly gang, I want you to know the truth. Do not stop me! Think how much I have ventured for you—for you!"

She thought and was dumb.

"I have risked my life and I may lose it. The chances seem against me, but a game is never won till the last hand is played, and I may yet be triumphant over the double-faced villain who would destroy me and you too, little one. If you only thought you might love me a little—"

"How can I tell?" she panted. "No, no! I do not love you—I never can!"

"Don't say that—don't! You may learn to love me by and by."

"You will deceive yourself if you hope so. I shall never love again! Jack Howard is the only man I ever really and truly loved, and now

that I know him for what he truly is, my heart is dead in my bosom!"

"And you will allow him to wreck your life after all!" cried Four Ace Frank, desperately. "You must not do that, Zoe! If I can escape and rescue you, we will go far, far away together—we will find a home somewhere where you will forget all the sorrows of the past. Your father shall go with us; he shall be happy once again."

"It cannot be!"

"You think so now, but you will change your mind."

"Never!"

"Will you not give me a breath of hope?"

"Oh, my friend! you know not what you ask or how it has hurt me to make the answers I have. But I could not answer differently. It would not have been right for me to have awakened a false hope in your heart."

"You are almost too frank—too honest," fell somewhat bitterly from his lips.

She looked pained.

"And would you have had me answer differently—would you wish me to deceive you?"

"It would, at least, have given me more courage to attempt to escape from this band of outlaws and rescue you."

She drew back and looked at him in a strange manner.

"You cannot mean you will not do all in your power now? If that is your meaning, it is impossible that you love me as you think—you have deceived yourself."

He still clung to her hands. How beautiful she was! He felt his blood coursing like liquid fire in his veins.

"Zoe, Zoe!" he breathed passionately, once more drawing her toward him; "strange as it may seem to you, strange as it seems to me, I do love you with an intensity I never dreamed myself capable of! I would sell my soul to the Evil One to possess you, my little darling! You shall be mine for all of Jack Howard or the whole world!"

He caught the frightened girl in his arms and held her close to his breast. She was helpless in his grasp, but she lifted her sweet face appealingly. In an instant, he stooped and kissed her lips.

A cry of fury came out of the darkness over their heads.

"You miserable cur!" shouted the voice of Jack Howard. "Release that girl, or I will bury a bullet in your brain!"

Amazed, dumfounded, Four Ace Frank obeyed, and Little Zoe sprang from him. The gambler stared into the darkness above, but saw nothing.

"I have you covered, you wretch!" cried Jack Howard again. "I am going to shoot you in your tracks!"

With a shout of fury, Frank snatched out a revolver and fired toward the spot from whence the voice seemed to come. The next moment there was a red flash above, and a second report sounded like an echo of the first.

Four Ace Frank reeled back and fell!

CHAPTER XXIV.

CAPTAIN SHARK IS TROUBLED.

THE gambler was not slain, although the bullet from the revolver of the man above had passed so close to his temple that a red streak resembling a burn was left. Frank's fall was caused more by a stumble than anything else.

With a savage curse, he sprang to his feet, and, apparently forgetting the supposed danger of being shot by the men who were guarding the chamber, he leaped toward the opening. Little Zoe tried to cry out to him, but her lips only gave utterance to a gasping sound.

As the card-sharp plunged through the narrow opening, the weapon of the man above spoke again, but the bullet flattened harmlessly on the rocks.

"Go, you cowardly wretch!" cried Jack Howard. "You have escaped me for the time, but I will yet have your worthless life!"

There was a commotion in the passage, as if a savage struggle was taking place, then one of the men said to the other:

"Have ye the critter fast?"

"Fast an' foul."

"Zoe, Zoe!" cried Jack; "that man is deceiving you! Do not trust him! I have found my way here by an accident, but I am not able to reach you. All the same, I will save you in the end."

The girl was sorely perplexed, for she could not understand the things which were transpiring and they filled her with terror.

"I am your friend, Zoe," asserted Jack—"your true friend, although you may not be able to understand it. These outlaws are my deadly enemies."

One of the guards approached the opening.

"Come, gal," he called, "come out of thar."

"Do not do it," counseled Jack. "Stay where you are, and I will shoot the first wretch who shows his head."

"Father in Heaven!" sobbed the distressed and trembling girl; "what shall I do?"

"Ef ye don't come out ter oncet, we'll wring

ther neck of ther critter as wuz jest in thar with ye."

Scarcely knowing what she did, Zoe staggered from the chamber. In the passage she was taken in charge by the guard and led away.

Captain Shark was amazed, angered and perplexed by what had occurred.

"How that fellow came where he is, is something I cannot understand," he declared to his men, who had gathered around him. "Of course it was he who shot the nigger."

"It looks thet way, cap'n."

"Do any of you know of a way of reaching a position where one can look down from above into the chamber where the girl was placed?"

No one did.

"That makes the mystery still more puzzling," muttered the leader of the outlaws. "How that man could get there in the darkness unless he is perfectly familiar with every inch of this cave is something more than I can understand. But, now he is there, we must take good care he does not get out."

There was a growl of assent.

"In the first place, one man, with ready weapons, must watch the passage to the chamber where the girl was held. That will prevent him from descending by means of a rope and roaming around among us as he pleases. If he can get here in any other manner, we shall have to look out for ourselves. Anyhow, he will not find it an easy thing to get out of the cave since the back passage is blocked."

"You bet not!"

"I suppose that has been properly attended to? Where is Sam?"

"Right hyer, boss," and the squat outlaw stepped forward a little from the darkness of the outer circle.

"Did you let the bowlder into the passage?"

"Yup."

"Then it will hereafter be impossible for any one to enter or leave the cave by the rope?"

"Kirec'."

"Well, I am glad that is attended to. A double guard must be put over the other entrance and a watch kept for any one who may attempt to sneak out and escape. We have the very fellow cooped in here that I would like most to get my hands on. It is our Christian duty to never allow him to see daylight again."

"P'raps his frien's know of his comin' in."

"If he came in by the rope, it is all right if they do. They will not be likely to follow him."

"Thet's right."

"And now I want you to make one more thorough search through the cave, doing your best to discover if there is any way to reach the spot where Jack Howard had the privilege of firing at me."

Three-quarters of an hour were spent in an unavailing search.

"I cannot understand it," asserted the leader of the outlaws, shaking his head in perplexity.

"P'raps he hain't bin in ther chamber a tall," suggested one of the men. "P'raps he reached thet spot from some other openin'."

"In that case, he was not the person who shot Black Rule."

"Thet's so."

"And we have failed to discover any one else in the chamber who does not belong here."

"Sure."

"What are we to think?"

The men were all puzzled.

"By Moses!" mumbled one. "I'm beginnin' ter git ther shakes! I'll low this yere cave is gittin' mighty onhealthy."

The others growled in chorus.

"We may have to desert it suddenly," confessed Captain Shark; "and I want every man to hold himself on the alert ready to warn his companions of danger when it comes and ready to desert the cave with the others—but not till the others go. The galoot who slopes on his own hook will be considered a traitor and treated as one."

This was plainly understood.

"Where has the girl been taken?" asked the chief.

"To ther Parlor."

"Good! But there will have to be a watch at each entrance."

"One man's ernough ef he stays right with her all ther time."

"Well, that will do for the present, but if I decide to keep her in the cave a great while, different arrangements will have to be made."

After giving the men some further cautions, the captain walked away toward the chamber where he had left Blind Bent senseless and bound hand and foot.

A few seconds later, a cry brought several of the band running toward the spot. In a furious rage, Captain Shark met them.

"He is gone!" he cried, giving utterance to a torrent of oaths. "He has escaped, curse the black luck!"

"Who?"

"Blind Bent! His bonds have been cut by a knife, and he is not in the chamber! The devil has broke loose in this cave! I begin to believe there is a traitor in our midst! Scatter with lights and search for the blind fool!"

CHAPTER XXV.

OLD PLUG UGLY AT WORK.

THROUGH the opening in the wall Old Plug Ugly had witnessed the peril of Blind Tom Bent. Quick to act in such emergencies, the daring miner snatched out a self-acting revolver, thrust the muzzle through the opening and pulled the trigger, thus taking a snap-shot at the brutal negro with the knife.

It was a fortunate shot, indeed, for it saved Tom Bent's life.

As the smoke drifted from the opening, Old Plug was peering through once more, and he nearly uttered a shout of satisfaction as he saw Black Rule stretched at full length on the floor and Blind Bent still clinging to Captain Shark's throat.

"I hope Bent 'll succeed in stranglin' ther pesky critter!" gritted the miner. "Ef he duz, blamed ef I don't try my luck at saltin' ther rest from this yere port-hole. We'll kem putty nigh bein' er p'ison dost ter this rotten gang. I'd sock et ter ther gambler now ef I c'u'd without takin' risks at saltin' Bent."

He uttered a soft exclamation of disappointment as he saw the leader of the outlaws tear the blind man's clutch from his throat.

"Reckon I'll hev ter sling lead oncet more, ur they'll cook ole Tom's custard. I'll jest rattle er leetle ole death an' deestruction in thar ermong 'em."

But he did not. He heard Captain Shark tell his men to knock the blind man on the head, but when one of the outlaws darted forward to obey, Bent's body was directly in the path of the bullet by which the miner beyond the wall would have stretched the fellow beside the negro.

Plug plainly heard Captain Shark's order to hunt down the man who fired the shot by which Black Rule was slain.

"That means me," came grimly from the old miner's lips. "But I'll be ap' ter make it derved kinder cordial fer ye ef ye do find me. It will be 'tarnal intrustin', ter say ther smallest amount."

His first thought was to rush along the passage and reach the rope-ladder, by which he could probably escape from the cave.

"But w'at ef they sh'u'd fix it so I c'u'dn't git back?"

That settled it. He was not ready to leave the cavern yet awhile.

"I'll take my chances at dodgin' 'em."

Desperate chances they were. He darted back toward the open chamber and barely reached it in time to escape being penned into the passage and forced to leave the cave or fight.

Two of the Sharks were coming toward him, and the light of their torches threatened to expose him to their view.

"It'll be ther wuss fer you ef ye do see me," he whispered, looking around for a place of concealment.

He was forced to throw himself into the shadow of a bowlder and creep round it as they passed. The torchlight showed him some projecting points of rock and a narrow shelf some distance over his head.

As soon as the men had rushed past into the passage, he began scaling the wall. It was uncertain work in the darkness, but he fully understood how desperate his situation was.

"Got ter do it!" he gritted.

Slowly he toiled upward, hearing the calls of the outlaws in various parts of the cave and pausing once or twice to glance at their flitting torches.

"Hol hol hol!" he chuckled. "Raised er reg'ler bullybaloo, didn't I! Jest stirred up ther ijees er leetle dite, I reckon. Wal, thet'll do 'em good. It'll kinder keep 'em on ther anxious bench."

He reached the narrow ledge with considerable difficulty and stretched himself upon it, clinging to the rocks with one hand and grasping one of his heavy revolvers in the other.

A few minutes later the two outlaws returned from the unsuccessful search in the passage, and before long the party of angry and mystified desperadoes gathered almost beneath Old Plug Ugly's precarious place of concealment, enabling the old miner to listen to the discussion that followed.

When Plug heard Captain Shark direct the squat outlaw to block the back passage, he resolved the design should not be carried out.

"I'll jest hev er finger in thet pie," was his mental observation. "Ef thet passage is blocked ther sittyvation will be er leetle onpromisin' fer yours truly, O. P. Ugly, Esquire. Ef I git ther opportunity, I'll hit you one, Samuel, an' hit you fer keeps. Amen."

Fortunately, the outlaws moved away almost as soon as the thick-set outlaw turned into the passage.

With more haste than caution, Old Plug Ugly swung himself down from his rocky perch. Away after the outlaw called Sam he darted, seeing the twinkling of the fellow's light ahead.

"Blamed ef I ever hed so much fun sence I wuz er kid!" laughed the veteran. "I never did strike sech er real good, old-fashioned social time as this yere turns out ter be! Danged ef 'tain't better'n er side-show ter a circus!"

He kept as close to the outlaw as he dared,

and he finally saw the man halt not far from the limit of the passage.

"Reckon ther stone's thar," thought Plug. "Now fer real ole business."

As he crept swiftly and silently forward, he heard heavy blows, and the light of the outlaw's torch, which had been thrust into a crevice in the rock, showed the man swinging a heavy sledge, an instrument which had probably been left at that point for the very purpose it was now being used to accomplish.

"Derved ef I hain't got ter git at him lively!" flashed through Plug's head. "He'll hev thet rock down inter ther passage in erbout two shakes."

Like a creeping cat, yet with remarkable swiftness, the determined miner approached behind the unconscious man and dealt him a terrific blow with his clinched fist. As the outlaw went down, Plug drew a knife and flung himself upon the man.

"Nary chirp, critter!" he hissed, seizing the dazed and astounded wretch by the throat, and flashing the knife before his eyes. "Jest one leetle peep'll cause me ter cut ye real bad right whar it'll hurt. You kin bet yer sweet-scented socks I'm givin' ye straight goods all-wool-an'-er-yard-wide. Ef you've got any single bit o' brain in thet head o' yours, you'll be mighty kyeerful 'bout waggin' yer jaw."

The man could not have uttered a sound if he had wished, for Old Plug's stubbed fingers were fairly crushing his throat. The miner saw this, and let up somewhat, whereupon the outlaw began to cough.

"Thet's er mighty bad cough," observed Old Plug, with grim humor. "It's w'at some peopies call a graveyard cough, but I call it er bemp-necktie cough. I never knew er man ter cough jest thet way thet didn't arterwards hev trouble with Jedge Lynch. I'm sorry fer ye, but I reckon ye're booked fer hangin' 'less I find it necessary ter cut yer throat."

"What—want?" gurgled the outlaw.

"I want ter tell ye er few things, an' thet's why I hev taken all this yere trouble. Fu'st is, thet this bowlder hain't goin' ter be dumped inter this passage. Do you savvy?"

No reply.

"Next," continued Old Plug, calmly, "is thet I hev taken er notion ter look under thet mask you wear. You will excuse me ef I remove it."

He took off the mask and peered sharply into the outlaw's face.

"Waal," he drawled, "I reckoned I knowed ye. Over in Coffin City ye're known ez Shoo-fly Cobb, an' yer wanted mighty bad fer hoss-stealin'. Down at Di'mon Diggins they'd like ter see ye fer killin' Jeff Short. Ther sherrieff o' Gunnison wants ter see ye, too. Oh, Sammy, Sammy! w'at a naughty boy you hev bin!"

The outlaw ground out an oath.

"Don't swear, Sammy," counseled the veteran; "fer ef ye do, ye won't catch no fish. It's powerful wicked to swear. W'at's thet look I behold in your eye? Can it be you think lettin' off er couple or three yoops? Ef so, let me tell ye ter say yer prayers fu'st, fer so help me Bob, I'll wipe ye out ther instant ye fetch ther fu'st squeal, amen!"

If the outlaw contemplated making an outcry, this threat silenced him.

"Now, Samxy," Old Plug went on, sweetly, "I reckon I'll hev ter disarm ye—so. These yere guns o' yours may come handy fer me ef yer frien's git me cornered an' I use up all ther cartridges I hev in ther ones I kerry. This knife I don't want, so I'll jest see how fur I kin throw it."

Having disarmed the unlucky outlaw, the miner continued:

"Now I'll hev ye flop right over on yer stummick, Sammy; an' I'll caution ye ter lay puffedly still ef ye don't want ter git this tickler o' mine atween yer shoulder-blades."

"W'at are ye goin' ter do?" asked the outlaw.

"Now, don't ye be firin' too many questions at me. I'll 'splain as I go erlong. I w'u'dn't leave ye in darkness as ter my intended movements, though I shall hev ter leave ye in ther darkness o' this passage w'en I take ther torch erway. Jest you flop as I tole ye."

And the desperado was forced to "flop."

With some cords which he produced, Plug bound the man's feet securely.

"Next," said he, "I will gently divest you of your elegant coat, Sammy."

This was quickly done, then the miner tied the outlaw's hands behind him, taking the greatest care to make them secure—as he thought. Then he felt in the helpless man's pockets and found a long plug of "pig-tail" tobacco.

"Jest w'at I want!" he chuckled. "I'll fix it like er babby's sugar-plum."

From the lining of the outlaw's coat he tore a strip of cloth, wrapping it around the tobacco. In a few moments he had made an excellent gag.

"Now stiddy, critter!" he cautioned. "You may be tempted mighty hard ter yoop, but it'll be an unlucky thing ter do. Hold yer level ef ye want ter live. Open yer mouth an' took in yer bits."

With a bitter oath, the luckless wretch permitted the gag to be placed in his mouth. When it was made secure, Old Plug Ugly

stepped back and surveyed his work with satisfaction.

"Slick as grease," he commented. "Worked ther game neat, didn't I, Samuel? Oh, I'm er Jim, you bet yer boots! You don't seem ter talk much o' any, pard. Kin it be you hain't feelin' well?"

The outlaw made a gurgling noise.

"I don't understan' thet," asserted Old Plug, soberly shaking his head. "I never did study any language but plain United States, an' I hev bin 'cused o' murderin' thet."

"Now I'll tell ye w'at I inten' ter do, Sam, my boy. I'm goin' to putt on this yere hat an' coat an' mask o' yours, then I'm goin' ter play I'm you. With this kiver over my mug, I reckon I kin fool your purds, an' ef I don't raise merry hell o' with 'em, it'll be beca'se I can't spell able."

When Plug had arranged himself, he indeed looked much like the squat outlaw. He made a mocking bow to the reckless fellow who had been watching his movements.

"Now you kin see how you look in this rig, Samuel. Pritty bird, hain't ye! I feel proud ter contemplate yerself, don't ye! I don't reckon yer pards will be able ter tell ther odds atwixt us, Sam. I shell tell 'em I hev dumped this yere big bowlder inter ther passage, so they won't be likely ter come snoopin' roun' hyer ter fine ye. You will hev ther privilege o' layin' hyer 'ter think an' think an' think. Your thoughts will be ap' ter be mighty pleasant. You kin contemplate yer chances o' 'scapin' Jedge Lynch. I will be—Hello!"

A chorus of shouts came from the chamber beyond the passage.

"Now I wonder w'at in blazes is up! Them critters are ther wu'st galoots ter be yoopin' 'bout su'thin' thet I 'most never saw. I sh'u'd think they'd git tired o' so much yellin'."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OLD MINER'S PERIL.

BIDDING the helpless outlaw farewell, Old Plug took the torch from the crevice and returned along the passage to the chamber from whence the shouting had proceeded.

As Sam, he mingled freely with the outlaws and soon learned the cause of the outcry. No one regarded him suspiciously. One or two asked if he had been successful in letting the bowlder into the passage, to which he replied briefly that he had, making his voice sound as much like that of the character he was personating as he could.

He made his way to the chamber where Blind Bent was lying, and found that the unlucky parent had recovered consciousness. The resolve to release the blind man and get him out of the clutches of the outlaws was foiled for a time by the appearance of others belonging to the band.

"Reckon I'll fine out whar they hev ther front door," he thought, as he left the chamber. "I 'low I wuz on ther right trail w'en they brought old Bent in, but I want ter make sure o' it. Ther time may come w'en I'll want ter git out at ther front way fer all o' knowin' o' ther back door. Feller can't know too much w'en he's in ther outlaw-circumventin' business."

By the light of the torch he was able to explore a great part of the cave to his satisfaction, and he learned he had truly been in the passage that led to the main entrance when he saw the blind man brought in a captive.

"Thet settles thet," he nodded, with pleasure. "Now, thar's one more passage I want to investigate."

His investigations led him to a small chamber out of which it seemed the bottom had dropped, for it was one vast dark gulf of unknown depth. The disguised man held his torch out over the ebon expanse, but its flaring light revealed nothing but blackness to his eyes. From far, far below came the soft and mysterious murmur of restless water.

The old miner drew back with a shudder.

"Er plunge down thar'd mean death, sure pop!" he muttered. "I don't keer 'bout takin' ther jump ter-day, excuse n.e. It guvs me ther chizzles."

He went back along the passage and again entered the main chamber. As he did so, he seemed to hear the echoing reports of two pistol-shots in swift succession.

"More excitement, I'll bet er boss!" exclaimed Old Plug. "Guess I'll amble roun' ter see w'at it's erbout!"

He had heard the shots exchanged between Captain Shark and Jack Howard, but he was filled with amazement when he heard the outlaw chief declare it was Jack who had fired at him.

"Wal I will be double-derved!" thought Plug. "Thet gits me! I sw'ar, I don't believe it wuz Jack! How could ther boy get thar? I left him er right smart bit from hyer, an' I reckoned he'd stay thar tell I kem back. This yere business is gittin' complicated, b'goash!"

In all that followed he successfully played the part of the squat outlaw Sam, even deceiving Captain Shark when that worthy questioned him concerning the passage.

But Plug had decided that what work he did must be attended to at once.

"Some derved fool may take er notion ter

'vestigate ther blockin' up o' ther passage," he thought. "Then I'd be dished. I've jest got ter git up an' hump my little self like I wuz in er 'tarnal hurry. These critters are goin' ter take er tumble ter me afore shortly."

His next move was to find where Little Zoe had been taken and how she was guarded. He decided to attempt her rescue after he had aided Blind Bent out of the cavern.

"Pr'aps I kin git ther old man erway without kickin' up er bobbery, but I shell hev ter knock over one galoot afore I kin help ther gal out. Ef her daddy's free, I kin retreat with her fightin' ther critters off."

He was given an excellent chance to set Blind Tom free, a thing which he succeeded in doing without being discovered, and he hurried the sightless man into the passage that led to the knotted rope. There Bent came to a sudden halt.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded. "I know you are Old Plug Ugly by your voice, but I will not leave this cave without my child, my little Zoe, my darling!"

"I tell ye ther hain't no time fer foolishness!" hissed Plug. "Ther leetle gal's all right."

Finding the blind man obstinate, the old miner resorted to a piece of fiction which he considered absolutely allowable under the circumstances.

"She is all right, I say. I hev got her out ahead o' ye, and she is waitin' fer us. Don't make er blazin' fool o' yerself now, Bent, ur we may both lose our lives! Come erlong!"

"You wouldn't lie to me!" questioned Bent, plaintively—"you wouldn't lie to a poor old blind man?"

"W'at d' yer take me fer!" spluttered the veteran, who was greatly wrought up over the delay. "This yere foolishness is only makin' yer chances smaller o' ever gittin' ter be with Leetle Zoe any more. Ef them critters ever git ther grippers on ye ergin', they'll shorely butcher ye!"

"Oh, if I could only see!"

"Ef ye hed two good eyes, ye c'u'dn't see in this infernal darkness, so come on," and he fairly dragged the distressed parent along the passage.

They were still some distance from the knotted rope when Plug came to a sudden halt, uttering a savage curse of dismay.

A shout from the cavern behind him had reached his ears.

"They've diskivered you are gone!" he gritted. "Now ther dogs'll be hot onter our trail! W'at in Helen Blazes shell I do?"

It did not take him long to decide.

"I'll turn back an' throw 'em off ther scent," he said. "I kin do it. Jest you keep right along tell you come ter ther eend o' ther passage whar thar's er rope thet's full o' knots. Thet rope's solid, an' ther best thing you kin do is ter climb out as lively as posserble. W'en ye gits ter ther top, you'll fine yerself in er place whar ye'll hev ter crawl erlong on yer han's an' knees. I reckon you'll know w'en you reach ther open air, an' you'd best wait thar fer me. I'll shorely be erlong ef these critters don't salt me fer keeps."

He wanted to say no more, but hurried back along the passage. When he reached the point where it opened into the main chamber of the cave, he saw two men approaching with torches.

"Hello! thar's Sam!" cried one.

"He'll know ef the blind cuss is in the passage," said the other.

"W'at's up, pards?" growled Plug, counterfeiting the voice of the man whom he was supposed to be.

They hastily explained that the blind man had escaped, and asked if he had seen no signs of Bent in the passage.

"Nary sign," asserted the disguised miner. "I hed ter go clean back ter ther place whar ther bowlder blocks it up, fer I dropped one o' my revolvers thar w'en I wuz knockin' out ther wedges. Tain't no use fer ye ter look fer ther ole man in thar, fer ye won't fine him."

Thus assured, the men turned away.

The search for Blind Bent was a failure, and Captain Shark was furious.

"I don't understand this devil's work!" he raved. "There is something crooked about it, or this cave is bewitched! Anyway, I am going to have a good look at the face of every man."

The men were gathered in the chamber where Black Rule had met his death. About half of them wore masks.

"I have come to the conclusion there is a traitor among us," added the chief. "If there is, I will find him out, and he shall receive the dastard's death he deserves! You fellows whose faces are covered with masks will take the coverings off. The man who hesitates betrays himself."

Old Plug Ugly was in a perilous position. He grasped his revolvers, resolved to fight to the death.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CRY OF HORROR.

SURROUNDED as he was by the desperadoes of the mountain league, the old miner had never been in a more perilous position. The instant his mask was removed he would be exposed to his deadly enemies, and exposure seemed to signify death, swift and certain. Hesitation to

unmask would be taken as a suspicious sign and draw every eye upon him.

In the twinkling of an eye he resolved to take his enemies by surprise by opening fire on them before their attention was centered on him. In another instant he would have done so, when—

"A leddy ter see ther cap'n."

Into the chamber walked one of the band, followed by Antoinette. Captain Shark uttered an exclamation of surprise, striding toward the woman.

"What brings you here at this time?" he demanded, savagely.

"Eet was my horse zat bring me, Waltar," she laughed, showing her perfect teeth and appearing quite calm.

"But I told you not to come till it was night again."

"I could not wait."

"Fool!" he hissed. "Ten chances to one you have been followed."

"Noting of ze kind; we be vera car'ful zat nobody do follow us."

"You disobeyed my order!"

"Oh, well! your pardon I do ask," a trifle mockingly. "Eet is one dretful t'ing to disobey you! You nevar disobey me!"

He gritted his teeth, forgetting to carry on his investigation for the traitor at that time.

"You are altogether too independent, Antoinette!"

"I haf oftun thought zat of you, Waltar."

His face flushed and his anger increased. He had been in no pleasant mood when she appeared, and she had taken the very course to still further arouse him.

"Why did you not wait till nightfall, as I requested?"

"Oh, I geet vera impatient; I want to come and see what kind of place zis be. I haf great desire to see ze men; you know I always do admir ze men, and I admir zem ze most when zey are brave men. You say you t'ink all your men are brave."

"That is not your reason for coming so soon."

She lifted one hand with a protesting gesture, laughing again.

"You are vera ungallant, Waltar. I know not now to understand you."

"Well, I understand you. Speak plainly."

"Well, zen, eet was ze girl—I want to see ze prit-tee leetle girl zat you haf here."

He understood her. She had become jealous of Little Zoe—she had fancied he would make love to the mountain song-bird, having her in his power as he did. The fancy had so worked upon her that she had found it impossible to wait for nightfall, so she had come at once that she might be where she could watch him.

"You have had your trouble for nothing," he coldly declared.

She lifted her eyebrows.

"Ees zat so?"

"That is so."

"I fear I do not understand ze monsieur. Ees not ze leetle girl here?"

"She is."

"Zen why I am not able to see her?"

"There are the best of reasons."

"But I weesh to know them."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"The principal reason is that I do not wish you to see her."

Antoinette looked still more surprised. Her face paled and she showed just the tips of her teeth in a very suggestive manner, speaking slowly:

"You do not mean zat you would refuse zis of me, Waltar?"

He bowed, coldly.

For a few seconds the woman looked ghastly, then a hot flush crimsoned all her face and her bosom rose and fell tumultuously, her small hands being tightly clinched.

"Zere mus' be somet'ing haf happen to ze girl zat you do not want me to see her. You are 'fraid she will tell me. Waltar, you do not play ze honest game wiz me!"

"Had you waited till nightfall, as I requested, you might have seen her. As you disobeyed my order, I shall see fit not to gratify your desire."

She looked straight at him in silence for several moments, then she glanced around at the men who were witnessing the scene. A great rage at thus being humiliated before their eyes arose in her heart. Wheeling, she advanced toward the chief, with all the dignity of a tragedy queen.

"You s'all not refuse me zis!" she cried, hoarsely. "You never do anyt'ing like zis before; I s'all not submit to eet now!"

"How will you help yourself?" he sneered.

"I will call on ze men!" she declared, turning toward them. "You had better haf a care, monsieur, for you should know my powar wiz ze men when I haf ze desire."

"But these men are sworn to me, and you can have no effect on them."

"Do you t'ink so? That is where you do deceive yourself. Zey are ze grand noble men zat are brave, and brave men always stand by ze ladies. Waltar, I will bet you somet'ing zat zey will obey me before zey will you eef I only say ze word."

Captain Shark glanced at his men and was

amazed to find that not one of them allowed his eyes to meet those of his chief.

"By heavens!" thought the captain of the mountain league. "I more than half-believe she is right! It is wonderful how she can control those whom she fancies to bring under her influence. I have never dreamed of her bringing her power to bear against me, but I fear that is exactly what she is doing here. I must try another course."

"Can I see ze prit-tee leetle girl, Waltar?" asked the French siren, in her sweetest manner.

He flung out one hand, impatiently.

"I suppose I shall have to humor you," he growled, "or you will never get over it."

She laughed in her most musical manner.

"I t'ink you would do so in ze end. You was only making ze sport of me. Oh-oh you are one vera bad boy!"

"Come," he said, taking up a lighted torch, "if you wish to see the girl, follow me."

"Lead ze way, Waltar."

As they passed out of the chamber, Old Plug Ugly drew a breath of relief.

"Wal, thet wuz w'at I call er 'tarnal tight squeeze!" was his mental observation. "But fer ther fottornate 'pearance o' thet feemal, I'd jest bin compelled ter wipe out ther hull o' nery gang, an' ther good Lawd knows I hain't no desire ter rob Jedge Lynch o' any fun!"

Captain Shark did not lead the way directly to the place where Little Zoe was held a captive. Instead, he took the passage that led to the fathomless gulf into which Old Plug Ugly had peered. Antoinette laughed and chatted as they moved along, but the man spoke no word. His mind was busy with dark thoughts.

Suddenly they stood on the brink of the black gulf. Then the leader of the mountain outlaws fell back a step and blocked the passage.

Amazed, Antoinette gazed down into the darkness, recoiling shudderingly from the brink.

"Where be ze leetle girl?" she asked. "She cannot be here. Why you fetch me here, Waltar?"

Then their eyes met and she saw the devilish light which gleamed in his cruel orbs.

A pitiable cry of horror came from her white lips, and she shrieked:

"Oh, God! you would keel me—you would keel me!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

A TERRIBLE smile passed over the face of the gambler, and for an instant his eyes wavered before hers. The smile was that of a fiend.

She put out her white and trembling hands, trying to speak, but only gasping sounds came from her lips. The horror of her situation had stricken her dumb after that first terrified cry.

Like a statue he stood, the smoking torch held a bit above his head, but the light falling full upon his face. And the woman also remained rigid and motionless.

Out of the unknown depths of the dark abyss rose a mysterious murmur—a meaning like that supposed to emanate from the lips of lost souls forever banished from the blessed light.

To both man and woman it seemed they kept silent a very long time. Someway, neither wished to move first; both waited for the other to speak.

At length, a harsh and heartless laugh came from the lips of the gambler.

"How do you like the looks of that little hole, Antoinette?"

She swayed blindly for a moment, then her lips became set in one straight and rigid line, and by a great effort of her will, she gained control of her shaken nerves.

"Why you deceive me, Waltar?" she asked, measuring her words with a care that revealed the effort it cost her. "Why you bring me here?"

He laughed again, but there was no merriment in the sound.

"Oh, I took a fancy to show you that little opening. Is it not pleasant to contemplate?"

"You said you would take me to ze leetle girl."

"Did I? Why, I must have been joking, for I assure you I had no thought of taking you there."

She put up one hand, as if he had struck her a blow in the face. Her lips moved, but her words came scarcely louder than a whisper:

"Eet is one terrible joke! I do not like eet, Waltar! Zis place—oh, eet be terrible! I would go from here."

"I do not doubt it," he said, mockingly. "You would be only too glad to go from here, but—"

He made a gesture, the interpretation of which seemed to turn her blood to ice-water. She clinched her hands and closed her teeth firmly to keep from giving utterance to another shriek of horror.

(Of a sudden, there was a rushing sound in the air above their heads and several bats dashed almost directly through the flaring blaze of the torch, startling both man and woman, causing one to utter a cry and the other an oath.)

"Zis place be haunted!" gasped Antoinette.

"It was nothing but bats," retorted Four Ace Frank, regaining his composure.

The woman made a step toward the passage, but he blocked the way, warningly lifting the hand that did not hold the torch.

"Do not be in a hurry, Antoinette," he said. "I want to talk things over a bit before—before we part!"

"Oh, Waltar, Waltar!" she moaned, suddenly breaking down. "Zat eet should evar come to zis! I haf done ev'ryt'ing for you, and now—"

She thrust out one hand toward the abyss, shrinking from it and clutching at the wall with the other hand. It was a pitiful expression of the horror that possessed her soul, but there was no sign of relenting on his iron face. His jaws were set, and a resolve, deadly and terrible, was expressed by his features.

"You say you have done everything for me—"

"Yes, yes!"

"Which means simply that we have worked together for one common end. I have assisted you, and in return you have aided me in my schemes. The spoils have been equally divided. I have spent my share as I pleased—it is gone; you have had jewels, fine dresses, carriages, anything, everything you desired. As I look at it, neither of us is in any way beholden to the other."

"Is zat ze way you look at eet?"

"It is."

"You t'ink I haf nevar love you?"

He flung out his hand.

"Love! Why, woman! you do not know what love is!"

She caught her breath, sharply.

"You are wrong, Waltar," she declared, with a great effort. "Eet may be zat you t'ink I do not know, but I haf love you!"

"And so that is the name you give to your passion?" contemptuously. "You deceive yourself! That is no more love than darkness is light! It is a different emotion entirely. Love! I tell you again, you do not know what it is!"

"Ah! you nevar make me believe zat! You t'ink because I do deceive many men to make them t'ink I do love them I haf no heart at all. But I do haf one! Eet is here, here!" striking her bosom with one clinched hand.

"A lump of ice!" sneered the man.

"A flame of ze fire!" she flashed back. "You cannot t'ink eet be ice, Walter; you do not mean zat! I never find but one man zat I do care for. Wiz all ze others I can play. But there is one and him I do care for! For him I will do anyt'ing! Zat man haf bring me here—for what?"

"She is trying her arts on me, now that she is cornered," was the thought which passed through his head. "I will not be turned from my purpose by her smooth tongue."

It seemed as if the woman read his thoughts, for she quickly asserted:

"Eet is not to deceive you zat I speak; eet is true! Haf I not told you so t'ousands of time? Do you forget?"

No, he did not forget the times she had whispered her love for him, nor did he forget she had whispered the same to many other men. What if she did love him as she professed? Was not that all the stronger reason why she should never return back along the passage? He did not care for her. His passion for the woman, intense though it once was, had ever been of the coarser kind. Now it was sated.

"She would come between me and the only one I could ever love," he mentally observed. "Whether she truly loves me or not, she must perish! If she knew of my passion for Little Zoe, she would never rest till it was thwarted. The chances are she would find a way to kill the girl, knowing that would strike the more keenly at my heart. No, no! I must not steel my nerves! The deed must be done!"

"I forget nothing," he spoke, aloud; "but what are a million such expressions. To how many other men have you told the same thing—poor fools!"

"Zat was in ze game—eet was to get ze money."

"And what you told me was in the game, for I aided you in getting the money. I placed within your grasp the men you were to ruin, with cards I aided you in the work, and when we were done with them, if it was necessary, I killed them!"

"Zat be true; you do not fear anyt'ing—you meet ze best of them. For your bravery I do love you! Haf I not proved it by ze way I haf stood by you?"

"I never loved you, yet I have stood by you—which proves nothing."

She uttered a moan of despair.

"I cannot convince you, Walter!"

"You would gain nothing if you did."

"What can you mean?"

"I will talk plainly, for I have no time to fool away. The time has come for us to part—I want to be rid of you."

Once more she caught at the wall for support, lifting one hand as if she had been struck.

"Is eet zat?" she gasped. "Oh, God! is eet zat?"

"That is just what it is."

"And you would keel me?"

He did not reply—it was not necessary.

"I know," she suddenly shrieked—"I know! You do care for another!"

The ghost of a grim smile flitted across his hard face.

"You have struck the truth at last," was his confession.

Her eyes blazed, her lips were drawn back, her white teeth gleamed like those of a tigress.

"I know who eet is!" came hissing from between those teeth.

"Quite likely."

"Eet is zat leetle girl—zat leetle fool!"

"Now you have struck oil."

"But she do not care anyt'ing for you!"

"You are not sure of that."

"She do love Monsieur Weelson."

"Oh, no! You have successfully aided me in crushing that affection quite out of her heart, many thanks. In that manner you played your last game for me."

"And I did play against myself, like ze fool!"

He bowed.

"That is about the size of it."

"Steel, I t'ink ze leetle girl will nevar care for you."

"And right there you deceive yourself bad. I have succeeded in making her think I am the next thing to a saint. Since she has been in the cave I have posed in the light of an unfortunate captive who risked his life in trying to save her from the wretches into whose hands she has fallen. She was deceived—"

"Ze leetle fool!"

"That is because she is so innocent. I am quite taken with her, and thus far I have worked the game in a most beautiful manner. When I save her from her captors, as it will appear, she will understand how much she owes to me. I shall press my claim, and—"

"But you haf her in your power now. You will not let her free? You haf her where she cannot resist you."

"That is true, but I am not playing that kind of a game. I have really and truly fallen in love with her, and—"

"Will ruin ze child."

"No; I shall marry her."

If possible, Antoinette became more ghastly than before.

"You will be one fool!"

"On the contrary, I shall be a wise man. It is time I settled down and became something more than an adventurer."

"And you mean to do zat?" incredulously.

"Exactly."

"You nevar will."

"Why not?"

"Eet is not in you. You will be not'ing but what you be now."

"You are mistaken. I am sick and tired of the life. Since I have seen this charming little girl, a great change has come over me. She is so good, so pure, so innocent! I shall give up my old life and go into a respectable business of some kind. I shall reform."

"Bah! It can nevar be! There is blood on your hands; do you t'ink eet will come off so easy? *Ma fois!* you are vera foolish man!"

He scowled blackly.

"Well, I shall try it, anyway."

"You truly mean to marry ze leetle girl?"

"I do."

Antoinette's eyes blazed.

"She haf robbed me of you!" she hissed. "I could keel her! I could keel her!"

"That is why I brought you here. I knew it would not do for you to know the truth and live."

"And so you would murdar me?"

"Oh, that is an unpleasant word. No, I would not do that; I would simply aid you to take a jump out into the darkness there."

"You are ze devil!"

"I have been told so before."

"Eef you do keel me, I will come back from ze dead and be your ruin!"

He laughed harshly.

"What care I for such threats as that! I have learned the dead never return. Spirits I do not believe in."

"But I can waste no further time. Say your prayers, Antoinette!"

"Oh, Waltar, Waltar! you cannot mean to do zis t'ing!"

"Say your prayers!"

She fell on her knees, stretching her hands toward him, appealingly, the picture of despair and entreaty.

"Waltar, for ze love of God, do not keel me! I haf done anyt'ing for you—I will do anyt'ing! I cannot die now! Eet cannot be you will keel me who haf loved you so!"

His face became like adamant, his eyes blazed, he leaped toward her to accomplish his horrible purpose.

With a shriek, the woman leaped to her feet, snatching a dagger from her bosom.

"Back, back! I will give you zis!"

She struck at him as he seized her and the blade penetrated his arm, bringing an oath from his lips. He grasped her and forced her back to the brink, her face like that of a corpse and her eyes protruding with horror. She tried to drive the dagger into his throat, but he foiled the attempt. Then he gave her a savage push, at the same time tearing himself from her grasp.

For one moment she toppled on the brink, wildly waving her arms in a vain attempt to regain her equilibrium, then she plunged headlong downward into the darkness of the terrible gulf, uttering a last wild shriek that cut the murderer's heart like a keen knife!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

SHUDDERING with horror at his own act, his face pale and his hands shaking, the gambler knelt on the brink, holding the flaring torch out over the black abyss, staring and listening.

He heard a splash far, far below, then out of the depths came a sound like the gurgling made by a person who is strangling, followed by the mysterious moanings which forever arose from the blackness of the place.

"That is the last of her!" came huskily from his lips. "I had to do it!"

He arose and was suddenly seized by a terror such as he had never before experienced. Some bats flew against his torch and dashed it from his hand, sending it whirling down into the black hole, leaving him in darkness.

With a gasp of horror, he groped his way to the passage and then fled along its winding course as if pursued by a legion of demons.

When he appeared among his men, they were amazed, for he looked as if he had seen a spirit and he was shaking like a man with the tremens. It was some time before he was calm enough to utter a word.

As he was recovering, one of the men who had been left to guard the passage into the chamber where Little Zoe had been originally confined appeared, plainly very much excited.

"Ther devil's ter pay, boss!" he cried.

"What is the matter?"

"Matter enough! Ther's heap plenty of critters up thar over ther chamber whar ther gal wuz putt, an' I 'lows they're 'bout ter walk in on us."

"You mean—just what?"

"Thet I reckon we're goin' ter be 'tacted."

This was startling information, indeed.

Springing up, Captain Shark hurried to the passage, where another of the outlaw gang was crouching, a cocked revolver in his hand.

"What's the racket, Ben?" asked the chief.

"Thar's er gang of critters up thar, sure as shootin', Cap," asserted the man. "They've bin talkin' mighty low like, but I've heered 'em say suthin' 'bout ropes, an' I 'lows they're goin' ter come in on us."

"It will not be a hard thing to stand them off."

"Not ez long ez thet light burns in ther chamber; but that hain't goin' ter last alwus. It mus' be gittin' putty well burnt out now."

"That will be long enough, for it will give us time to get out of here. Dave, go bring three rifles. We will hold this point as long as there is any need of doing so, and if the enemy attempts to walk in on us, they will be received very warmly."

The rifles were brought and three men were posted in the passage, instructed to wipe out every man who attempted to descend a rope into the chamber.

"When you see the light is giving out," said Captain Shark, "send me word. I hope to have everything arranged by that time."

The outlaws began immediate preparations for leaving the cavern. While they were about this a man suddenly dashed out of the passage supposed to be blocked by the huge boulder. Old Plug Ugly uttered a curse of dismay as he saw this person.

It was the outlaw known as Sam.

With a shout, the man attracted the attention of his comrades.

"You are bein' fooled!" he cried. "Thar's er critter ermong ye as is your deadly enemy—an' thar he is!"

He pointed straight at the disguised miner.

With a yell, Old Plug Ugly tore the mask from his face, at the same time snatching out a revolver and opening fire.

"Whoop'er up, Mariar!" he shouted. "Guy me room ter spread, you p'ison imps o' Satan! I'm er hard boy ter tackle, an' don't ye fergit thet! Down you go, fodder fer rats!"

In a moment he dealt consternation among the thoroughly astounded outlaws. Straight toward the passage that led to the knotted rope he dashed.

"Stop him!" shouted Captain Shark. "It is that old devil Plug Ugly! Shoot him!"

The outlaw Sam sprang into Plug's path. Having emptied the revolver in his hand, the undaunted miner flung it straight at the man's head. By rare good fortune, it struck the squat ruffian fairly between the eyes, knocking him down.

"Pop goes ther weasel!" squealed the old miner, delightedly. "It don't pay ter git in ther way o' ther ole man, fer he's er holy horror on trucks!"

Into the passage he darted, half-a-dozen bullets singing viciously about his ears or flattening on the rocks. By rare good fortune he was untouched, but he halted the moment he was concealed by the darkness beyond the mouth of the passage.

"Holy smoke!" he gasped. "W'at er break!"

Thet wuz er derved tight squeeze, an' I hain't outer the woods yit by er long shot. How did ther critter git clear? Thet's w'at I'd like ter inquire. It must be—Derved ef I don't believe ole Bent set him loose!"

For a moment the outlaws remained inactive, then Sam struggled dazedly to his feet. His comrades quickly gathered around him, and in a few words he told them what had happened.

Captain Shark swore roundly.

"After that daring old devil!" he cried. "Kill him! Fill him with lead!"

"Come on, dog-gone ye all!" gritted Old Plug. "I'll jest make this cave inter er reg'ler cemetery!"

Turning, he hurried along in the darkness, keeping one hand against the wall. The Sharks came in hot pursuit.

"I can't clomb thet rope afore they'll git under me," muttered the fugitive. "They c'u'd jes stan' thar an' blow ther hull packin' outer me. Reckon thet won't do. I'll either hev ter stop an' fight or—"

He did not give utterance to the other alternative, but there was a plan formed in his mind.

"Ef I kin do it!" came through his clinched teeth. "Ther critter must hev knocked ther wedge hafe-way out. Thet's goin' ter shut me off from savin' ther gal, but I hev got ter look out fer my own skin. I don't see ary other way now."

When he reached the narrowest part of the passage he ran against the huge boulder that was only waiting a few well-directed blows to send it rolling into the underground corridor. Fumbling around in the darkness, he found the heavy sledge, grasped it firmly and calmly awaited the approach of his foes.

"Got ter hev some light on ther subjec'," he observed placidly. "Twon't do ter make any miss hits hyer."

The outlaws quickly appeared, bearing lighted torches. Long before they could see the old miner the light was sufficient to show him where to direct his blows. Placing himself in such a position that the boulder would divide him from his enemies if it rolled into the passage, he began to swing the heavy sledge.

The outlaws heard the blows and interpreted their meaning aright, which caused them to hurry forward still more swiftly, uttering savage shouts.

"Squawk, dad-blast ye!" gritted the miner, as he swung the heavy sledge with all the strength of his muscular arms. "Who keers fer all ther noise ye kin make. Ef this yere ole stun will only take a tumble ter itself—*Thar she goes!*"

He leaped back as the great rock began to move with a grating, grinding sound, but a cry of disappointment burst from his lips and was echoed by yells of triumph from his pursuers.

The boulder only moved slightly, and then it stopped!

The Land Sharks were almost upon the old miner, but he calmly swung the sledge once more, directing the blow at what he considered a vital point in the obstruction. His judgment was sound, and that one blow proved sufficient.

The great rock moved once more and plunged into the passage, nearly smothering the old miner by the cloud of dust it started, effectually blocking the way and leaving Old Plug Ugly in utter darkness.

CHAPTER XXX.

"A COUNCIL OF WAR."

"BLOW me blind ef I hain't glad ter git my ole peepers outer ye oncet more, lad! I will 'low thar wuz er time w'en it did seem like we'd never meet erg'in this side o' ther river thet divides this from ther hereafter. Let me feel yer paw once more, boy!"

Old Plug Ugly and Jack Howard clasped hands for a second time. Both had the appearance of having encountered hard knocks, but Jack was in the worst plight, his hands and face being cut and bruised and his clothes torn.

"But we're chipper as two chickadees, allee samee!" laughed the old miner. "It takes more'n er rough-an' tumble tussle ter do us up fer keeps. In an ordinary 'fair, we come up right peert ev'ry time, bet yer scads! But I will 'low thar is some things as do puzzle me mightily."

"I don't wonder," confessed Jack. "I have been puzzled myself not a little."

"Over w'at?—how I got inter ther cave o' them p'ison varmints? Waal, I jest follered ther four ace critter right in. Thet wuzn't much, but you kin bet yer boots gittin' out wuz w'at made me hustle!"

"You may as well tell me the whole of your adventures; after which I will relate mine. We can sit right down here."

"All right, lad—all right. We've got ther hull day afore us."

So they sat down on the ground, allowing their horses to crop the short grass which grew near at hand. It was early morning of the day following the adventures related in the last chapters, and the two friends had met by chance, Old Plug having the horses in charge.

"Now fer er council o' war, lad," nodded the old miner, producing a short cob pipe and begin-

ning to whittle some tobacco from a huge plug. "W'at I wants ter know is w'at made ye leave ther critters an' how kem ye in ther cave o' ther Lan' Sharks. Them are two things as stick in this ole crop o' mine."

As concisely as possible, Jack told of his adventures up to the time he found himself looking down into the chamber where Zoe was confined, all of which the reader already knows.

"Derved ef thet wuzn't sing'ler!" commented Old Plug, pulling vigorously at the pipe, which refused to "draw" to his satisfaction. "It may hev bin luck, but—Diddly-dern ther terbacker! Either it's damp ur ther stem o' this pipe's plugged tighter'n blazes!"

While the old man was fixing the pipe so it would work, Jack continued his narrative, telling how it happened he took the shots at Four Ace Frank.

"Thunderin' pity you didn't sock it ter ther cuss fer good an' all!" growled the veteran. "Ef you hed, I might 'a' bin able ter got off with ther leetle gal afore thet critter guv me erway. As it wuz—Thar! I thought I'd be able ter make ye go arter a time! Terbacker's all right; it wuz ther pipe."

"I did my best to end his career," asserted Jack. "Had I not been aroused to a point of furious rage, I should not have fired at him in the first place; but after I had exposed myself by doing so, my only desire was to send a bullet through his black heart."

"I got all ther p'int's o' thet business from ther inside. Ther hull gang wuz jest knocked silly. Ef I'd hed two good men with me jest then, I c'u'd 'a' stampeded ther critters an' reskyed ther gal without hafe tryin'. But, go on with yer narration. How did ye git out o' ther place you hed tumbled inter?"

"My pursuers followed me. By means of lariats tied together, they let themselves down through the hole by which I tumbled into the cavern. I heard them and knew they were after me, so I hid in the darkness. They were certain I had gone down into the lighted chamber by some means, and they resolved to follow."

"More pluck than brains," commented Old Plug. "They must hev knowed they wuz divin' right inter er hornets' nest."

"They were in no particular hurry to follow, and they spent considerable time in arranging the lariats so they could beat a hasty retreat."

"An' ther time they spent thet way wuz jest w'at saved ther skins. Ef they'd rushed right erlong, ther men in ther passage w'u'd 'a' made coffin-stuffin' o' 'em."

"When they did go down, I followed, having waited a sufficient time for them to move along into the passage. They did not discover me, nor did they discover a single outlaw. The Sharks had deserted the cave. I learned this in time to get out ahead of them, but my ankle was still lame, and I did not reach the place where I left the horses till it was quite dark. Then I found them gone."

"Yes; yer Uncle Plug hed bin thar. Last I knew o' you, ye wuz in ther cave. I hed ter take ther critters ther water, so we missed each other. But good luck brought us tergether this mornin', an' now we're all ready fer ther battle erg'in."

"I am afraid the battle has gone against us. The Sharks have vanished, and Zoe has vanished with them."

"Now don't ye go ter gittin' down-hearted, lad. We'll come out at ther top o' ther pile—*ur bu'st!* We foun' ther leetle gal oncet, an' we'll find her erg'in."

"Easier said than done, unless you have some idea of where she has been taken."

"Nary ijee. Ther boss Shark o' ther lot didn't let ther t'others inter his plans, an' I wuz forced ter slide out kinder suddint like. I'll jest guv ye ther p'int's."

Briefly the old miner related his adventures, telling very little that the reader does not already know.

"But what became of Tom Bent?" questioned Jack, as Old Plug finished.

"Don't ax me!"

"You did not find him after you ascended the knotted rope and crept to the open air?"

"Nary find."

"What do you think?"

"I think he sot ther outlaw free, an' kem 'mighty nigh bein' ther death o' me by doin' so."

"But what has become of him?"

"Can't say fer sure. He wasn't more'n hafe in his right mind."

"He may have wandered away after getting out of the cave."

"Most likely he did."

"Poor old man! He has been unfortunate, indeed!"

"Now you're talkin'! He has been mighty onlucky! We may never sot eyes on him erg'in, but thar hain't no tellin'. Our fu'st work is ter look fer ther leetle gal."

"Right!"

"An' fer Captain Shark—don't fergit him, lad! We've got er leetle score ter settle with thet imp o' Satan."

"Right again, Plug!"

"Twon't be very hard ter find Leetle Buttercup arter we find ther boss Shark o' ther lot, an'

we want ter sw'ar ter know no rest tell he haser rope roun' his p'ison neck ur is salted fer keeps. W'at say?"

"You know I am with you."

"Hold on thar!" cried a strange voice, as a man arose from behind a boulder not far away. "I want ter come inter thet game my hull big-ness. I'm with you ter see Cap'n Shark stretch bemp, an' I'll guv ye all ther 'sistance I kin ter round ther murderin' wretch up. He has—Hold hard! Up goes my fns! Don't shoot!"

Jack recognized the man as the one who had been guiding Antoinette to the outlaws' retreat the day before.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAUGHT IN THE SERPENT'S COIL.

"HAVE you no news of my daddy? Oh, don't say no—I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

With a look of deepest sympathy on his face, Four Ace Frank slowly shook his head.

"Don't give way, Miss Zoe!" he entreated.

"Because we have not already found your father is no sign we shall not find him in the end. Everything possible is being done; the country is being scoured by faithful men."

Little Zoe wrung her hands in a pitiable way.

"I fear he will never be found!" she sobbed.

"I am afraid he is dead, dead!"

The card-sharp came closer, speaking with an earnestness that surprised himself:

"You must trust in God, Zoe."

"I almost fear God has deserted us in this terrible time."

"God never deserts the pure and innocent," assured the man; but his words came near choking him. Black wretch that he was, he scarcely believed in the existence of a Supreme Being!

"But it has been so long, long!" cried the girl.

"The minutes are like hours and the hours days! It seems as if I had grown to be an old woman! I feel so old!"

"You must cheer up. You need to eat more and sleep more. Why, you have scarcely slept at all, child! It is no wonder you feel old."

"I cannot sleep."

"You must! You need it so badly."

"But I dream such horrible things."

Four Ace knit his brows.

"You dream of—what?"

"Of daddy and of—Jack. Never but once have I dreamed a pleasant thing of Jack. Then it nearly made me crazy when I awoke to find it all a dream."

The gambler clinched his hands behind him and took a turn up and down the small room. Suddenly he stopped at the girl's side.

"You must try to forget that young villain," he said. "It is the best thing you can do."

"I do try—I do! But it is useless; I cannot forget!"

"You are growing pale and thin in these few days," with genuine consideration in his voice.

"If you could only have a dreamless slumber, you would—I have it!"

She was startled by his sudden exclamation, but he went on swiftly:

"I have the very tuing! What a fool I was not to think of it before! Of course, you would not object to a dreamless slumber of several hours, no matter how produced, if you felt refreshed by it?"

"I—am—not—sure," speaking very slowly.

"I want to be awake when daddy comes."

"Yes, I understand; but you want to feel fresh and bright, so you can cheer him up. If you are tired to death, you will not be able to meet him as you should."

"Perhaps not."

"And then the journey—we want to start as soon as possible after your father is found."

"Yes."

"I will see that she has a sleeping-potion," thought the schemer. "It will be the best thing for her."

Once more he walked up and down the small room. Zoe stood with drooping head, her hands clasped and the lamplight falling upon her golden hair, making her a picture of hopelessness. The gambler had indeed learned to love this fair girl as much as his crime-distorted soul could love any thing human. A look of actual pain passed over his face, as he paused to gaze at her.

"Zoe!" he spoke the word softly, being at her side once more.

She did not look up.

"Zoe," and he ventured to pass one arm lightly around her waist, "have you lost your confidence in me?"

She did not heed his arm; she did not reply.

"I have told you I would find your father, living or dead, and I will surely keep my word."

"Dead!" and she lifted her haggard face, her heavenly blue eyes wild and staring with a great horror. "My poor old blind daddy dead! No, no, no!"

He bit his own tongue, as he smothered a savage oath at his own blundering folly, well understanding he had uttered the most ill-chosen words he could have spoken.

"Of course, we shall find him alive!" he hastened to assure, with a suddenness that would have seemed ludicrous to himself on any other

occasion. "I have no thought that he is really dead. He will turn up all right at the last."

"God grant it!"

"You know how fortune has favored us. It was something marvelous, our escape from the clutches of the Land Sharks."

"True! I can scarcely understand it now. Twice you escaped them, and the second time you rescued me. I have wondered at it more than I can tell."

"It was all through the aid of that unknown friend who set me free. But for him, I should be a dead man now and you would still be in Jack Howard's power."

"You give too much credit to some one else. I do not forget how much you ventured—I shall never forget it!"

A thrill of satisfaction ran over him, but his lips said:

"It was nothing; I would go through ten times more—for you! I would go through fire or flood! There is *nothing* I would not venture!"

She would have drawn away a bit, but he held her close, his heart throbbing with the passion that had taken possession of his soul.

"Cannot you give me the least encouragement, Zoe? Am I to go on without a ray of hope?"

She felt his hot breath on her cheek, she even heard the heavy beating of his heart. When she tried to speak, her lips only gave forth a low murmur.

Right or wrong, Four Ace Frank interpreted that sound as being of an encouraging nature. She did not repulse him, and up to that time she had held him at arm's length. A feeling of intense joy took possession of him, and he trembled like a bashful youth making love the first time.

"I saved you from the outlaws and brought you here to Pick Pocket," he went on. "I have watched for the appearance of Jack Howard, resolved if he came, to keep you from falling into his power again. But for that, I would be searching for your father among the hills at this minute. My friends are there, and they will yet find him."

"But he is blind, blind! He will surely perish in all this time!"

"That is not certain by any means; in fact, the chances are that he will be found all right, unless he wanders into a pitfall. I have heard he once before wandered away into the hills while in a half-deranged condition. Yet he still lives, unless—"

"Unless he has met his fate this time. Poor old daddy! His life has been hard, hard! yet he firmly believes everything is for the best! He puts his trust in God."

"If I bring him back to you—"

"If you bring him back to me, alive and well, then you may speak to me of the future. I cannot think of the future now; I can only think of him. If you restore him to me, I shall be so deeply in your debt that you will have my everlasting gratitude."

"Nothing more?" bitterly.

"I dare not promise more."

"It is not your gratitude I want, Zoe—it is your love!"

"Love cannot be forced, dear friend. I have learned that, young though I am. Only one have I ever loved with all my heart; I feel that I cannot love another."

"Your feelings will change. There is hope in the future."

"It may be—I cannot say. I will give you no encouragement, for I cannot truthfully do so. If you care for me as you profess, you will do all you possibly can to save my poor daddy, even though you know I cannot love you."

"I surely shall. But if you knew it would save your father from death, you would promise to be mine?"

"I would do anything, *anything* to save him!"

"Even if you did not love me, you might be happy as my wife."

She started from him, with an exclamation of surprise.

"Surely you do not mean—you *cannot* mean you would want a wife who did not love you?"

"There is many a happy and contented wife who does not love her husband as you understand love."

"Oh, I could never, never live like that!"

"You may think so at first, but you have not considered it in all its lights. When you go from this part of the country, what will you find to do? How will you support yourself and your blind father?"

"I—I can sing."

"He will not consent for you to sing on the stage."

"I can sing as I did in Jericho."

"How much worse that will be! In the mining-camp you were known, and everybody was your friend. In a strange place you will have no friends—you will be considered as wandering mendicants. Surely your father could not consent to such a life. Yet what else will there be for you? With him on your hands, how can you support yourself?"

The man drew the picture with almost brutal bluntness, but he had an object to gain—the great object of his life. He knew he was adding

to the poor girl's distress, but would not the end justify the means? He thought so, at least.

"Oh, I know not what I can do!" moaned Zoe, wringing her hands. "It seems as if I could obtain work of some kind, enough to get us food and shelter."

"A wretched life to lead. The East is crowded with girls seeking work of some kind. Those who have employment can scarcely support themselves, and you have another burden on your hands. I tell you, Zoe, you do not comprehend your position."

There was a desperate look in her eyes—a look pitiable to see.

"We were happy in Jericho before Jack Howard came," she moaned.

"But you cannot go back there now."

"No, no!"

"You will have to turn your face to a new life. Think of what I have offered you. You shall have a home; never again shall you know what want is."

"And daddy—"

"He shall be cared for, Zoe. You can have him constantly with you where you can look after his comfort yourself. There will be no doubts and fears for the morrow. The old man can spend his last days peacefully, happily. Think, think of all this, then compare it with the other picture."

She put out her hands to him, and he grasped them eagerly.

"Do you consent?"

"Wait; I cannot say now. You fully understand I can never love you as I believe a wife should love her husband?"

"I am willing to take my chances."

"If I do consent, it will not be on my own account. I am ready to do anything for my poor old daddy. Any sacrifice I can make for him will not be too great."

"When will you give me my answer?"

"When you bring him to me, alive and well."

The tinkle of a bell sounded through the room, causing the scheming villain to start and listen. There was a moment's pause, then the bell rung again, striking twice in succession the second time.

"I must leave you for a time, Zoe," declared Four Ace Frank, regretfully, still holding her hands. "I am going to have some food sent in and with it a glass of wine. You will please drink the wine, for it is of a peculiar soothing nature and will cause you to soon fall into a dreamless slumber. For your own sake, for your father's, for mine, drink the wine and sleep! I hope to see some color in those cheeks when next I come. And now—"

He drew her toward him, stooping to kiss her; but she suddenly snatched her hands free and leaped back a step.

"No!" she gasped, hoarsely—"no, no! not now!"

A look of disappointment passed over his face, but he bowed quietly.

"As you please," he said. "Do not forget to eat, drink the wine and sleep. Farewell for a little time."

Then he left the room.

For several minutes after he departed the girl stood rigid as a statue, staring straight at the door. At length, she slowly lifted her hands to her head, a bitter cry coming from her white lips.

"Oh, Heavenly Father!" she moaned. "How wretched I am! A little while ago I was so happy! A little while—and still it seems months! Worse than that, it seems like a dream! I can scarcely realize so much happiness was ever mine. How cruelly all my bright dreams have been shattered! Oh, God! It may be all for the best, but it seems so hard to bear—so hard!"

Poor Little Zoe! How cruelly she had been deceived! Little she dreamed of the craft of the serpent into whose coils she had fallen!

"Jack!" she sobbed, wringing her hands—"Jack, I loved you! Even now, at times, I can scarcely believe you are the wicked wretch it appears. You seemed so honest, so noble! I would have trusted anything to your honor! Had not your own lips condemned you, I could never have believed you so black."

"And now there is one who has proven himself my friend who asks what I cannot give. In all this wide world there is only one man I can love! I may force myself to marry another, but, villain though Jack Howard is, I love him—I love him!"

Staggering toward a couch at one side of the room, she flung herself despairingly upon it.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SILENT SPORT IN MASK.

As Four Ace Frank passed out of the room he was met by the squat ruffian known as Sam.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the gambler.

"Critter over in ther White Dove Saloon whoopin' fer you, boss."

"Who is it?"

"Derned leetle runt that calls hisself Bad Man Bob."

Frank uttered a contemptuous exclamation. "What do I care for that fellow! Let him whoop! If that is all you had to tell me, you have wasted your time and bothered me for nothing."

"Hole on, hole on!" sputtered the man. "That hain't all!"

"Then why don't you spit out the whole of it! Don't beat round the bush, Sam, for you know if there is anything I dislike it is that. Come to the point!"

"Thet derned o'nery Ole Plug Ugly's thar."

"Well, that is of more importance. Does he appear to be looking for me too?"

"I 'low he is, though he don't 'pear ter be doin' nuthin' but lay round. I didn't reckon it wuz healthy fer me ter stop arter he kem in, so I sloped."

"Very discreet in you."

"But I hain't tole yew at this yere Bad Man's whoopin' erbout. He's got er pard with him that he 'lows kin wipe you out at poker."

"Another fool! Ten to one he is either dead broke or full of liquor."

"He may be dead broke, but he hain't boozed. He's straight ez er string, an' er derned queer critter at thet."

"In what way?"

"He keeps his face clean kivered by er mask, an' lets ther Bad Man do all ther talkin'."

The 'Frisco sport scowled a little.

"It is probably some fool looking for notoriety."

"Dunno 'bout thet. Bad Man says he's dumb as an' oyscher, but 'lows he hes got lots of rocks thet will talk big ef you shove your nose inter ther saloon."

"Well, I reckon I will have to go over. If Old Plug Ugly makes any trouble, I will salt him down. He knows a great deal more than is good for his health, but he cannot prove anything."

"Ef he c'u'd, our necks'd stan' er mighty good show of gittin' stretched. Anyhow, I'll feel heap sight better wen he's under ther sod."

"Where is Ben?"

"Down below."

Frank descended the stairs and found the man for whom he had inquired.

"I want you to take the bird some food," he said. "Make it as tempting as possible and add a glass of the wine I provided for her. Tell Granuy Snooks you want a sleeping powder for her, something that will make her sleep soundly for several hours, but will not harm her. Dissolve the powder in the wine. Do you understand?"

"I reckon."

"Well, take good care of the child. If anything happens to her while she is in your hands, I shall hold you responsible. Should I be wanted, you can send Sam to the White Dove for me."

He lighted a cigar as he left the building, and then sauntered leisurely down the street toward the saloon.

It was early in the evening, and Pick Pocket's street-lighter, the Moon, was not on duty.

Straight to the White Dove Saloon Four Ace Frank made his way, but ere he entered the saloon he felt for his weapons, to make sure they were handy for immediate use in case of necessity.

As he paused outside the door, the shrill voice of the self-styled Bad Man came to his ears.

"Double-dern er man thet makes sech er powerful swell 'less he's got ther sand ter back it—so say I! Who be I? I'm er wolf, I am, an' wen I howl it makes them as hears it shudder. This yere Four Ace Frank kem inter Jericho an' putt on er mighty pile of style. I will 'fess up I wuz kinder tooken with ther critter, but he didn't stay. Wuz he skeered? Wal, I dunno, but thar wuz su'thin' powerful queer 'bout ther way he sloped. He did hev some frien's in ther town, but I'll 'low they don't know w'at ter make of him now. I heerd he wuz here in Pick Pocket, an' so I fotched my noiseless pard thar over ter hev er leetle game of chip-chip with him."

"Wow! But thet pard of mine is er terrible bad man with ther keerds. Whar he's known thar don't nobody durst tackle him at even penny-ante. Luck! W'y, I've seen him draw five aces outer ther pack wen t'other feller hed fixed ter git four of 'em hisself. I 'low mebbe they don't use them five-ace packs in this yere town?"

"Well, hardly," acknowledged one of the citizens of Pick Pocket. "It would prove very unhealthy for your pard if he should find five aces in a pack in this town—that is, if he was into a game. If you will take the trouble in the morning to go out to the cemetery and look at the last grave in the southwest corner, you will see where we planted a fresh galoot who made the mistake of digging an extra ace out of a pack of cards. His funeral was a perfect success."

"Ther hint is wasted, pard," assured Bad Man Bob. "Dumb Dick allus plays er squar' game, an' ef thar is an' extry ace foun' in ther pack, you kin bet all yer boodle t'other feller wuz ther one as putt it thar. He hain't no sneak, Dick hain't, ur else I'd never tied ter him. As it is, we make er hull team with er bull-purp under ther sulky. He duz ther playin' an' I duz ther fightin'. I'm er tough case ter git r'iled, an' 'less er critter wants ter join ther Heavenly Chorus, he'd best not try ter straddle my neck. I never—Wow!"

The exclamation was one of intense amazement, for Old Plug Ugly had suddenly shifted his position so that the boaster's gaze fell fairly

upon him. Up to that moment Bad Man Bob had not suspected the old miner was in the saloon, and the look of fright that flashed over the braggart's face was ludicrous, to say the least.

At sight of the man who had actually spanked him, Bad Man Bob suddenly wilted. The spectators noted the change with some wonder, and one of Pick Pocket's tough citizens, who had been preparing to "light on" the red-head, halted and stared curiously at the boaster.

"It hain't you, boss?" faltered Bob, as soon as he could command his tongue once more. "Don't ye think it is! I hain't firin' my talk at you! You never done nothin' ter me that I sh'd lay up erg'in' ye, an' I hope we won't hev no trouble. I'm er wolf, but I hain't bankerin' fer er scrap with er reglar ole he grizzly."

"It's Four Ace Frank I'm lookin' fer. I reckon some of 'you critters must know whar ther galoot is? Go dig him out of his hoel an' tell him ter weld er bit of whale-bone ter his backbone, then bring him over hyer. My pard will play him chip chip, an' I'll stan' by ter see fair play. Whar is this yere Four Ace Frank any—"

"Did I hear somebody calling for me?" calmly inquired the 'Frisco sport, as he stepped in at the door. "I thought I heard my name mentioned as I was passing."

For a moment dead silence fell on the inmates of the room. The new-comer stood with his hands on his hips, his head canted a trifle to one side, the fresh cigar in one corner of his mouth, inquiringly glancing around the room, not seeming to notice the Bad Man, who was directly in front of him.

Bob made no immediate reply, appearing startled by the sudden appearance of the very man he pretended to be looking for.

With a short laugh and half a bow, Four Ace Frank turned toward the door, muttering:

"I must have been mistaken; my ears deceived me."

But Bad Man Bob called, cautiously:

"Mister."

Frank wheeled back.

"Did any one address me?" Again looking directly over the little fire-eater's head.

"It wuz me," confessed the Bad Man, meekly. "I hev bin inquirin' your place of residence."

The gambler slowly lowered his eyes till they rested on the little man.

"Ah! I beg your pardon for not perceiv'ing you before. I trust you will excuse the oversight. Have I ever had the pleasure of meeting you before?"

"Hev ye?" squawked the Bad Man, forgetting his prudence in his sudden indignation. "Wal, I sh'd say ye hed!"

"It had quite slipped my memory, I assure you."

"Wow! Thet's ernough ter r'ile even er peaceable wolf! But I hain't mad," he hastily added, as he fancied he saw a dangerous gleam in the sport's eyes. "Don't think I'm mad, mister! I w'dn't git started at sech er leetle thing ez thet. All ther same, you'd oughter 'member me."

"I have an exceedingly poor memory. Where did we meet?"

"In Jericho, dog-gone it!" snapped the red-head, his beard bristling like porcupine-quills.

"I stood by ye 'when ye wuz in fer stringin' up thet critter as kerried off ther blind man's gal."

"Ah! I have a slight recollection of that occurrence. But I have never been introduced to you. Still I suppose we might pass over all such formality as that and get down to business. What do you want?"

Bad Man Bob jumped backward at least three feet and looked around as if for the nearest and most convenient place of exit from the saloon, losing his wide-brimmed hat in his sudden consternation. A ripple of merriment went round the room.

"Wh-wh-what do I want?" stammered the startled man. "I don't want ary derned thing, hang me ef I do! My pard—"

"Is looking for me, eh? Well, trot him out."

"Oh, he hain't er fighter," Bob hastened to explain. "I am ther one thet duz ther fight—er—er—that is—I do ther talkin'." He's dumb."

"Well, what does he want of me?"

"He's heard as how you sometimes play ther game called poker."

"Well?"

"He's er chief at thet game."

"And he wants to try me a whirl?"

"Yep."

"About how large a game is he looking for?"

"Any limit thet's reasonable."

"Where is he?"

Bob picked up his hat, then turned and motioned to a figure that had been standing well back in the room. This person promptly advanced, revealing a somewhat boyish figure, attired in Mexican costume, a crimson serape being wrapped about his shoulders. He was as light of foot and graceful as a dandy.

But the thing about the stranger which attracted attention before all others was the black mask which he wore over his face, quite concealing it from view. The stiff part of the mask reached to the chin, but the concealment did not end there. From the bottom of the mask

depended a strip of black cloth, which was held back at either side by a dark string that passed behind the unknown's neck. In this manner even his chin and throat were concealed from view.

It was plain this person intended to keep his features from scrutiny.

His eyes were as black as the ill-fitting gloves which concealed his small hands.

"This is my pard, Dumb Dick," said the Bad Man. "He is er holy terror with ther keerds, though he hain't in ther habit of waggin' his jaw much. He 'tends ter business an' I 'tend ter ther talkin'. In thet way, we divide up ther work atween us an' git erleng finely."

"How is a man going to play poker if he does not talk?"

"Money talks," was Bob's expressive reply. "I reckon ther less chinnin' er man does in thet game ther better off he is. Ef them as is playin' has good eyes, they kin see ther size of ther chip."

"And so this silent kid wishes to match his skill against mine?" inquired the 'Frisco sport. "Wuzn't thet w'at I said?"

"I suppose he understands I do not play baby games?"

"Ef you take him fer er babby, you'll make ther biggest fool break of yer life. He may look kinder young, but he's got gray hairs in his mustache. He will play you a hearty game, pard, you bet!"

"All right. I will have to show him a few points that will make him feel faint. We will make use of that table there."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DUMB MYSTERY STRIKES.

"KIRKCT, me high lord," nodded the Bad Man. "This will tickle my pard 'most mightily."

"Well, I will endeavor to tickle his pocket-book before I am done with him. I am in a lucky mood to-night, and the man who invented poker would have no business with me. It will not make a boot's difference if your pard has covered his face so I cannot watch it."

"How in thunder d'ye tumble ter thet?" spluttered Bob, in disgust. "Never reckoned you'd git out'er it! Ef he hain't got a talkin' tongue, he hes got er talkin' face, an' thet clean guvs him erway. Ef he happens ter hold four of er kine, ye kin see it in his face same as ef it wuz er mirror; an' ef he don't happen ter hev only one leetle teeny pair of juces, he allus turns pale. He can't help it, an' so he jest tied thet rag over his mug, knowin' he wuz ter tackle ther wu'st mind-reader in this part of the kentry."

"Go tell that to the marines! What kind of a sucker do you think you have snapped up anyway! You make me very weary with so much guff! Let up on this chin-chin and follow me."

The 'Frisco sport led the way to the table. The Bad Man passed an arm through that of his silent pard, making a few cabalistic signs with his free hand, to which the Masked Mystery nodded.

As Four Ace Frank seated himself at the table, he called for a fresh pack of cards, to which Bad Man Bob added:

"Er sealed pack, 'member that. We want 'em jest as they kem from ther foundry; none of yer derned doctored pasteboards fer us."

"That is right," laughed Four Ace. "It is plain you understand that cards are sometimes marked."

"I'll bet er hoss you can't tell my pard anythin'."

"Quite likely, if he is half as deaf as he pretends to be dumb. In that case, I should not attempt to tell him anything. What will you have for a limit?"

"You say."

"Don't ask me. If I was to set the limit, I should say the sky, and that might be a trifle higher than your pard would wish to go. But I am not here to play a game for fun. It is scudi I am after all the time, every day in the week."

"Well, you will be apt to drop some right here. This is ther time you will git arter it an' git left. But, ef you are left, we shell consider it all right. Ketch?"

"I have heard say there is a law for any one who attempts to be punny, but I cannot swear to it. All the same, I do know such a person stands a fine show of dying a violent death. But I have not heard you name the limit."

"How will a thousand do?"

"A thousand what?"

"Dollars, dern it!"

"Is that what you call a healthy game?" with contempt.

"Howlin' Hottentots! W'at will satisfy ye?"

"Call it five thousand, and the regular ante a dollar. That will be light enough at one end, surely, and it will give your pard a chance to soar when he catches those four aces you were speaking about."

"Waal, hev it as ye like. I don't reckon pard'll kick, but I'll jest guv him ther p'int."

A rapid exchange of signals passed between Bad Man Bob and the Masked Mystery, who had taken a seat at the table opposite the 'Frisco sharp.

"He says he's 'greeable," announced Bob.

The cards appeared and Frank motioned for the silent sport to open the pack, which he did.

The crowd gathered around to see the fun, Old Plug Ugly quietly taking a place at one side of the table, directly opposite the Bad Man. Behind Four Ace Frank's chair stood a roughly-dressed and heavily-armed fellow, whose face was almost entirely concealed to the eyes by a coal-black beard. Long hair of raven hue fell from beneath his wide-brimmed hat and reached to his shoulders. His keen eyes were closely watching every move of the 'Frisco sport, but he spoke no word to any one.

The game began, first deal falling to the silent man in mask. Strangely enough the Mystery did not remove his gloves, even though they must have been unpleasant obstructions to free handling of the cards.

"I suppose he is afraid of getting his delicate hands tanned even though he is under cover," laughed Four Ace, glancing at his cards. "He is a bit too-too, and that is about as mild as I can put it."

"He hes got er temper of his own," asserted the Bad Man; "an' he'd be likely ter jump on your coat-collar ef he could hear ye say thet. I'll tell ye now thet he's er mighty bad man ter r'ile, even though he usually 'lows me ter do ther fightin'. W'en he gits ter bubblin' in earnest, suthin' 'most generallly splits wide-open from eend ter eend."

"Well, suppose you button up now and allow the game to proceed. Your voice is certainly sweet, but it so attracts my attention that I cannot keep down to biz."

"All right; I'm shet. But afore I close up fer good, jest let me tell ye thet ye will need ter keep mighty snug down ther biz 'less ye want ter go dead-broke 'fore ye gits out'er thet cheer."

The game opened lightly, several small pots being "swapped" back and forth, making it plain the players were "feeling" of each other. Four Ace Frank laughed as he raked in the sixth pot.

"This is going to be a regular pie for me," he declared. "Honestly, I do not think I ever struck such a snap."

"You'll sing a diffrent song afore you're through," grinned the Bad Man. "Pardie is jest playin' with ye now—kinder foolishin' roun'-like. You wait tell luck gits ter runnin' his way—"

"I am afraid I would have to wait too long. Excuse me. He will begin to wish he had never seen a pack of cards."

"Wow! You do made me tired with yer braggin'!"

The 'Frisco sport turned a look on the red-head that caused him to suddenly crowd back against the man behind him.

"Somebody will send you to a long rest, if you do not take a large-sized reef in that jaw of yours," came sternly from the gambler's lips.

"You talk too much for your own health."

"Beg pup-pup pup-pardon!" spluttered the little fellow. "I clean fergot I wuzn't goin' ter chin any more jest yit er while. I am so derned fergitful!"

"You will forget to draw your breath one of these days."

The game proceeded.

Old Plug Ugly watched the 'Frisco sharp closely, fully believing he would not play a square game, but for a long time the old miner could not detect anything crooked. However, Old Plug was "up to" all kinds of gamblers' tricks, and he finally detected the game the 'Frisco sport was playing.

With a bottle of shading fluid in a convenient pocket, Frank was secretly marking the backs of the cards, using one of his finger-nails instead of a brush. As the cards came into his hands he marked them with the delicate fluid, and none but an experienced eye could detect the cheat.

"I knew it!" was the old miner's mental exclamation. "Ret his skin! He c'dn't play er square game ef he should try! It won't be long afore he'll hev every blamed card fixed so he kin tell ther backs o' 'em as well as he kin ther fronts. Oh-ol! But I'll 'low he'll hear suthin' drap afore long!"

The veteran made sure his weapons were ready for instant use, then calmly continued to watch the game.

Four Ace Frank was an expert in all the gambling devices, such as "double" and "bottom" dealing, "slipping" cuts, "shuffling up" hands, "holding out," etc., but he rarely tried such tricks when playing with an experienced hand. Still Old Plug saw him deal from the bottom once or twice, and he certainly made the "pass" more than once, thus rendering useless the cut by restoring the cards to the original position.

If Dumb Dick saw these things, he made no sign. His dark eyes glittered keenly, but he attended strictly to business. Old Plug watched to see if the mask tried any of the games practiced by the professional gambler, but he saw nothing to convince him such was the case.

Once or twice the silent man held splendid hands only to have his opponent drop out of the game. At least once he held four Jacks against a "full house" in the 'Frisco sport's hand, yet Frank surrendered the pot without a struggle.

The speechless one made a gesture of disgust, then lifted his hands to exchange some signals with Bad Man Bob. The little fire-eater snickered with genuine delight.

"He says you don't 'mount ter shucks, 'Frisco," interpreted Bob. "Says ye don't know ther meanin' of the word sand."

"He will surely change his mind before we are done. I know better than to throw away my money. Pretty soon I will set down on him."

"You'll think ye hev sot on er tack. He's sharp as they make 'em."

The card-sharp smiled, sneeringly.

"He is not sharp enough to play this game; in fact, he does not know a thing about it. I should advise him to buy a little pack and put in his spare time practicing."

"Wow! Thet's er reg'ler insult!"

"Consider it anything you please."

The black eyes of the Masked Mystery were watching them closely, and he now made an impatient gesture for the game to continue.

From that point the 'Frisco sport won with great regularity, Dumb Dick only getting a small pot now and then.

"Ther time is right hyer fer me ter putt er finger inter ther soup," thought Old Plug Ugly. "I swar I didn't want any trouble with ther critter from 'Frisco tell arter I hed located jest whar he hes putt ther leetle gal; but now it looks like I c'u'dn't hev my way 'bout thet."

Finally a large Jack-pot was built. The Masked Mystery "opened it" and Four Ace Frank promptly doubled the sum. In this manner the pot was "fatted" several times, till several thousand dollars were on the table.

Some of the spectators scented trouble, and began to get out of the way.

After the draw the betting was deliberate and heavy. Dumb Dick called by a signal when he had placed his last dollar on the table.

"Can you beat three aces?" inquired Frank, exposing three cards.

The Masked Mystery revealed four kings.

"Well, I have another ace to go with the three, making four in all. The pot is mine!" He dropped the cards face upward on the table, and reached to rake in the stakes.

"Hold hard, critter!" cried Old Plug Ugly, shoving a revolver against the cheat's head. "Don't burn yer fingers! I'm onter your game!"

With an inarticulate cry, the sport in mask snatched out a long, gleaming dagger, half-rising as he did so, and struck straight at Four Ace Frank's throat!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UPROAR IN THE SALOON.

HAD that keen blade reached the gambler's throat, the stroke would surely have been fatal, making it plain the Masked Mystery intended to end the life of the man who had defrauded him.

But over Four Ace Frank's shoulder darted a strong manly hand that grasped the wrist of the beaten sport and checked the blow that was intended to be deadly. The man of the black beard and long hair had "chipped into the game."

"Hold on!" he cried. "I have an interest here!"

The dagger fell from the grasp of the masked sport, its point passing through a pile of bills and pinning them to the table. Dumb Dick's wrist was instantly released, and he sunk back in his seat, his eyes glittering and his sabbie mask moved by his panting breaths.

Four Ace Frank had been taken by surprise, even though he was watching for some such move. His lips parted to give vent to a bitter oath.

"What does this mean?" he snarled.

"Business, straight from ther should, critter!" nodded Old Plug. "Keep yer fingers 'way from yer tools 'less you are too mighty anxious ter pass in yer checks. I know you from A ter izzard, an' you oughter know me putty well!"

"I know you are a maddlesome old fool! This is not your funeral, and—"

"It's mighty ap' ter be *your* funeral, Pard Shark. Ef you hain't in er turrible hurry ter cross ther dead divile, jest you keep stiddy tell we git ther knots yanked out'er this business. I hain't pullin' pop fer ther fun o' ther thing."

"Well, what do you mean?"

"Thet I've twigged your crooked game."

"You lie, if you accuse me of playing crooked!"

"Soft, soft! It may be you do actually take me fer er blanked fool, but I 'low I hev got some brain left jest ther same. I hain't bitin' off more'n I kin chew."

"You will have to prove it, or I will have your heart's blood!"

"Thet's easy. I reckon you're bankerin' fer my heart's blood anyway; but I'm countin' on livin' ter see ye hanged up ter dry. Provin' all I claim is jest ez easy's rollin' offen a log."

"Give us your proof."

"It is printed on the backs of the cards."

"What do you mean by that. The cards were a fresh pack."

"P'raps you think ther ole man never saw

any finger-nail markin'? Waal, ef you do, you've made one mighty big error."

A desperate look flashed across the 'Frisco sport's face, but he resolved to brazen it out. Bluff was his favorite game, and just now it might work to his advantage. He knew he had plenty of friends in the saloon, otherwise he would not have thrust himself into Old Ugly's presence.

"If you accuse me of any such crooked work, you lie, old man!" came fiercely from his mustache-shaded lips.

"It's easy ter call er man er liar, but hard words never broke any bones. Ther keerds will talk fer themselves, an' talk mighty loud. Ef they don't show markin', I'll eat ther hull pack."

"Even if they do, how are you to prove I did it?"

"You trapped yerself by playin' with er pack as hed never bin used. Nobody c'u'd 'a' got at 'em afore, an' ther feller in tner mask never marked 'em, fer he's wore gloves all ther hull blessed time. No chance fer nail-work thar."

"You are too sharp for your own advantage!" hissed Frank, flashing a glance around to locate the position of his friends.

"Mebbe so; mebbe not. You needn't look fer yer pards, fer I've got as many frien's in this saloon as you hev. Them as hev bin yer frien's in ther past hain't all standin' by ye, not by er long shot. W'en you killed ther French gal by shovin' her down inter thet hoel you done ther thing w'at 'll put ther rope 'roun' yer neck in ther end."

The gambler paled, despite his wonderful nerve.

"What do you mean, old fool?" he snarled.

"Never mind jest w'at I mean now. Fu'st thing's ter settle this yere card business. Ef ther backs o' these cards are marked, it's good enough evvydence that you hev bin up ter crooked games. Will you hev them 'zained, ur will ye guv up ther pot?"

"Neither! I will not brook the insult you have heaped upon me. You hold the drop, but my friends are ready to wipe you out the instant I give the signal."

"Most likely them as *are* your frien's are ready fer thet; but let me tell ye thet some o' ther very ones you reckon on are your most deadly enemies. You can't say fer certun thet ary derved galoot in this saloon will stan' by ye w'en it comes ter ther pinch."

A sudden conviction that the old miner spoke the truth assailed the card-sharp. Like all gamblers, he was somewhat superstitious and believed in inward premonitions. At that moment he was assailed by a belief that fortune had taken a turn against him; but, for all of that, he was not the man to be cowed without a struggle.

Feeling certain Old Plug Ugly was his evil genius, Four Ace Frank registered a mental vow to have the miner's life, even though it cost his own. As if he had read these thoughts, the veteran laughed aloud.

"I'll prove ther w'us't critter you ever tried ter down," he asserted, grimly. "Jest now I'm holdin' o' ther drap, an' I c'u'd send er ball through your head by simply crookin' my front finger. 'Tain't real pleasant ter be in sech er sitt'yashun, I will 'dmit."

"But, business is business. Thar has bin too much chin-chin already. W'en er critter's cotched cheatin' ther spoils goes ter t'other feller, so you Bad Man galoot will jest rake in ther pile. Be mighty lively 'bout it, fer thar hain't no tellin' how soon ther fur will fly hyer."

With a haste that was little short of ridiculous, Bad Man Bob jerked the dagger out of the pile of bills and swept them, together with the gleaming yellow coins, to his side of the table. Swiftly he gathered up the whole amount, thrusting it into various pockets.

The Dumb Sport had been watching everything with glittering eyes, but making no move since being foiled in his stroke at the life of the 'Frisco sharp. The man who had defeated that deadly blow still stood behind Four Ace Frank's chair, keenly noting all that passed while he guarded against a repetition of the dagger-thrust.

"This is robbery!" cried the gambler. "Pards, will you—"

"Shet!" hissed Old Plug.

But the impending trouble could be no longer averted. Yells of rage came from the lips of the card-sharp's allies, to be answered by defiant cries from as many sources. The crowd instantly became a savage surging mob, heavy blows being dealt and weapons flashing in many hands.

Old Plug Ugly was struck a stunning blow on the head, and would have reeled to the floor but for the pressure of the crowd around him.

The deal-table was overturned and several men fell over it, going to the floor in a cursing, struggling heap. From out of this mass Four Ace Frank arose just in time to see Bad Man Bob and his masked pard disappearing through the doorway that opened to the street.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CHARGE AND COUNTERCHARGE.

A SAVAGE curse escaped the gambler's lips, and his hand flew toward a revolver, only to

feel his wrist grasped by iron fingers and hear a hated voice cry in his ear:

"Not so fast, you devil! Do not take any more lives on your hands till you have accounted for the crimes you have already committed! *Where is Zoe Bent?*"

Four Ace Frank recognized the voice, even though the man's face was concealed by the coal-black beard. A shout, half of rage and half of joy, broke from his lips.

"Curse you!" he cried. "You have thrust your head into the trap! You have walked into the snare I caused to be set! I knew you would come! You shall not leave this saloon alive!"

"Such talk is cheap. You would be a dead man this moment had I not saved you from the knife of the man you tried to defraud. But I did it out of no love for you."

The savage struggle continued all around them, but strangely enough, they stood in the center of an open space, undisturbed by the swaying, shouting men. They were forced to lift their voices to a high pitch, in order to be heard above the confusion.

"Where is Little Zoe?" again demanded the man of the black beard.

"Where you will never see her again!"

"You lie!"

Then the man of the black beard grasped the gambler by the throat.

But the man who, by his wonderful strength and skill, had won the position of chief of the Land Sharks, was not to prove an easy foe to conquer.

With a wrench, the card-sharp tore himself from the clutch of his enemy.

"You fool!" he laughed, sneeringly. "I have crushed better men than you by a single blow."

Then he seized the black beard and tore it from the face of its wearer, as it was false.

The countenance revealed was that of Jack Howard!

"I knew it!" cried Four Ace Frank. "You are searching for Little Zoe, are you, Harry Wilson? Well, you shall find—*death!*"

In another moment they were locked in each other's arms, swaying hither and yon in the midst of the surging throng, fighting for life!

"You are no match for me, boy," hissed the gambler in the ear of his intended victim. "I confess you are strong—are more strong than the equal of a common man—but I am not a common man."

"You are a devil—a human devil!"

"Why not say an inhuman devil?"

"It would suit you better."

"I knew you would come into this saloon for me. I set my trap. My friends were here to tell me."

"Your friends! You have not a true friend in the world! The members of your band obey you through fear, but there is not one who does not hate you—there is not one who would not be glad to see you dead! Those whom you count as your friends in this saloon, you cannot depend on. One of your own band has sworn to know no rest till he sees you lying dead at his feet. You sealed your doom when you murdered Antoinette!"

"You know of that?"

"Yes, from the lips of one of your most trusted men. He is here in this saloon, and though you think him your ally, he is ready to turn against you at the most critical moment."

"You lie, curse you!"

"I do not."

"Well, you shall never live to see the things you predict. Down you go!"

By a skillful trip, the gambler threw Jack to the floor, pinning him there with a knee on his breast and a hand on his throat.

"Hal hal!" he laughed, murder gleaming in his evil eyes. "Your time has come!"

A knife glittered in his right hand, the point being pressed against the throat of the helpless man. All that was needed was a strong and steady thrust to end a human life!

"Before I kill you," fell from the bearded lips of the would-be murderer, "look into my face and see if you cannot tell who I am."

"A dastardly wretch who disgraces humanity!"

"Ah, but you have known me in the past! You will not guess? Then I will tell you. I am—"

Two strong hands grasped his collar, and in another instant he was jerked flat on his back, the knife flying out of his hands.

"You are a pison skunk!" snapped Old Plug Ugly, as he attempted to hold the gambler down. "Lay still, critter! Dad-burn ye! You're wussen an eel!"

Taken at a disadvantage though he was, the gambler was not conquered. In truth he was like an eel, for he managed to squirm from the old miner's stubbed fingers. Then the surging crowd swept them apart.

Fortune threw Old Plug and Jack Howard together.

"Tarnal narrer squeeze fer ye, lad!" commented the old man. "Thet critter meant ter sock ye fer good an' all."

"You are right. You saved my life, Plug; I will not forget it. You are a friend invaluable in time of need."

Their hands met in a warm grasp.

"We're bound ter come out top o' ther heap in ther eend, pard, an' don't ye fergit it! We're fightin' fer ther leetle gal."

The crowd had separated into two sections, and the struggle seemed over for the time, though at any moment there might be another and more deadly outbreak. With weapons in their hands, the opposing factions glared at each other. Plainly, they were almost equally divided.

"Gott'er play er bold han' now, boy," muttered Old Plug. "We can't take any back-water, though it is too mighty bad this hes come afore we located ther gal."

Four Ace Frank strode forward, pointing an accusing finger at Jack.

"There he is, men!" cried the 'Frisco sport—"there stands Captain Shark!"

"You're er double-an'-twisted liar!" snorted Old Plug Ugly. "You can't work *thet* kind o' er game on this yere 'lightened kermunity!"

"I say he is the chief of the mountain robbers!" repeated the card-sharp. "What I say I can prove."

"You can't prove er derved o'nery thing, critter! But, I hev got ther backin' ter prove thet you are Cap Shark, yerself; ye dirty thief!"

"Do not listen to that old crazy-head! He doesn't know what he is saying more than half the time."

"You can't stuff 'em with thet kind o' chaff, Frankie. Ther ole man is heap sight better knowed in these parts then you be, an' I 'low his word will go as fur."

"You shall pay for meddling, old fool!"

"Waal, you will never collect the bill."

"I say Jack Howard, as he is known in these parts, is Captain Shark!"

"An' I say you're er truth-twistin' son of er gun! You are ther leader o' ther gal-stealin' gang!"

"Which you cannot prove."

"Which I can prove, or I'll eat my own head!"

"I do not care to listen to your trumped-up charges. That is plainly your game to save Howard's neck, but you cannot do it. He shall hang before another hour!"

"Bet ye ten ter nothin' you'll turn out ter be er liar 'bout thet!"

"If only Blind Tom Bent were here I could prove Jack Howard is what I say."

"I am here!"

Slowly the blind man felt his way into the saloon, appearing from whence no one knew. His clothes were in tatters and his face and hands covered with cuts and bruises.

"Who spoke my name? I am here."

Four Ace Frank uttered a cry of satisfaction, hastening to the blind parent's side and leading him forward.

"You have come at an opportune moment!" exclaimed the gambler, an exultant look on his face. "Jack Howard is here."

"Jack Howard, Jack Howard?" and the sightless man falteringly passed his hands over his eyes, as if trying to brush away the black cloud that forever hung there.

The exultant look vanished from the gambler's face and one of anxiety took its place.

"Yes," he said; "surely you remember Jack Howard, the wretch who stole your child from you?"

"Hold hard, you!" snarled Old Plug Ugly, taking a step forward, half-lifting the weapon in his hand. "Ef Bent don't 'membery a thing, don't you go ter—"

He broke off suddenly, understanding the blunder he had made. He saw the looks of wonder upon the faces of men who had maintained something like a neutral position with regard to the struggle, and knew his words and act would be taken as evidence of a desire to keep something concealed which the blind man might reveal—of a fear for the words which might issue from Bent's lips.

With a hard, short laugh, he fell back, saying, contemptuously:

"Go on with yer leetle game, Franklin. Ef you've got anythin' putt up, git it out. When you hev showed your keerds, we'll expose oun. We don't keer er boot fer all you kin git out o' Bent."

"Your act and words gave you the lie," asserted Four Ace. "You are afraid of what the blind man can reveal, and you know it. Not only do you know it, but you have given it away by your break."

"Talk is cheap. Jest you go on with yer fun an' see ef we don't show ye er trick wuth two o' yourn."

"Speak out, Bent," and the gambler turned to the blind man again. "You have not forgotten—you remember how Jack Howard stole your child from you?"

Bent seemed to consider a moment.

"My child? Do you mean Zoe? I reckon you must. What has happened, anyway?"

Old Plug laughed outright.

"Left, Franklin—left, sure's sin! Your proof won't hole watter!"

The gambler pretended not to notice these words, but the cloud on his face grew blacker.

"Have you forgotten, Bent?"

"I reckon it must be I have. I remember something, but it seems all hazy like. Tell me

what has happened. Where am I? I found myself wandering all alone, far, far from here."

Four Ace Frank smothered a savage oath.

"All the same, Jack Howard shall not escape his duel!" he grated. "Bent's daughter is ready to swear he is the chief of the outlaws."

"An' I am reddy ter swar you an' thet critter yerself," asserted Old Plug. "I wuz in ther outlaws' den an' saw ye in ther midst o' yer pards."

"That is a likely story! No one will believe you."

"Well, I have better proof than that. One of your men is ready to step forward and swear you are the chief."

"Old man, you lie!"

"Think so? Waal, I jest don't."

"Produce the man."

"Bud Kemp!"

At the call, the man who had conducted Antoinette to the retreat of the Land Sharks stepped forward and faced his former chief defiantly.

Four Ace Frank fell back a step, a snarl breaking from his lips, his hand dropping on a revolver-butt.

"Stiddy!" roared the stubbed miner, instantly covering the card-sharp with a cocked revolver. "Ef you pull it, I pull trigger; an' ef I pull trigger, you'll hear somethin' drap mighty solid."

Bud Kemp had turned pale and retreated a step, but as he saw how promptly Old Plug protected him, he once more faced his former chief.

"Let the man speak!" cried Frank, choking back his savage fury—"let him speak! His word will not be believed, for his face stamps him as a liar."

"You say so, but thet does not make it so by er long shot," grimly declared the old miner.

"If he lies about me, I will have his heart's blood!"

"You mean you will try ter hev it ef he tells ther truth 'bout ye. But you hain't ap' ter be snoopin' roun' arter blood w'en we're done with ye. Who is thes critter, Bud Kemp!"

"Captain Shark!"

"How do you know thet?"

"I have belonged to the band known as the Land Sharks."

"A self-confessed outlaw!" sneered the gambler. "Who will put any stock in his word?"

"W'at reason hev you fer goin' back on Cap'n Shark?" questioned Plug.

"I do it because he murdered a woman—as fine er lady as ever dored breath!"

"Whar wuz thet?"

"In the cave."

"How do you know he killed her?"

"I saw him an' her go inter ther passage known as only leadin' ter w'at's called ther Bottomless Pit. He kem back erlone. I went in ter look fer ther lady, but I foun' nary trace of her."

"Another foul crime on your hands, you devil!" cried Jack Howard, glaring at the scornfully smiling gambler.

"A pretty lie hatched up to protect yourself," bowed Four Ace Frank. "It is too flimsy to deceive any one. The malice behind it is plainly apparent."

"You are an adept at bluff, but it won't work this time."

"Bah! Do you suppose these people will believe the story of this self-confessed outlaw? If you do, you must be a big fool! Is it at all probable this man would dare come in here and boldly proclaim himself a traitor to a band of men who, without doubt, punish treachery with death? No, no; it w'n't wash! It reveals its authorship on its face, for any one can see it is a game of the Land Sharks themselves to remove a hated enemy. If this man had been betraying a secret of the band, he would have been shot down before he could utter the words."

"Mebbe so as things uster be," nodded Old Plug Ugly; "but 'low me ter observe thet thar hes been er change sence Reuben died. This man is not a traitor ter ther band; he is simply playin' fer vengeance on you, an' is willin' ter take ther quince-quonces. Ther very men you hev 'pended on ter putt er bullet in his brain hev turned 'gainst ye too. Pard Shark, your race is run ter mighty nigh ther close."

Once more the gambler was assailed by that premonition of approaching doom; but he threw it off with an effort. Still he glared around to see if the men whom he had trusted were indeed turning against him. Old Plug read the meaning of that look aright, a short laugh of triumph coming from his lips.

"Begin ter 'spect ther truth, don't ye, critter! Thought you hed sot er trap in this saloon fer Jacky an' ther ole man, but it kind o' looks like ye was cotched in ther trap yerself. I'm bettin' we've got two friens' byer ter yer one, now."

Old Plug was playing a bold game, for he saw the sympathy of the neutral portion of the crowd was turning against the man from 'Frisco.

"We'll round ther critter up yit, pard," he muttered for Jack Howard's ears. "Jest hole stiddy an' we'll hev him foul afore he knows it."

It almost seemed as if Four Ace Frank had understood those cautiously spoken words, for he flashed a look at the stubbed miner in which mingled hatred and a sudden touch of fear were apparent.

"It is *you* who set the trap," asserted Four Ace Frank. "I will not deny you have been successful in a measure, for, with the aid of the masked gamester, you have succeeded in robbing me of good money. But, I will have it back, every cent. As for the rest of your game, it will not work. When Tom Bent is himself again, I shall be able to convince everybody Captain Shark is the man I claim."

"But ye said ye didn't need his word; ye said ye c'd prove yer claim by his gal. Bring on ther gal."

"That talk sounds well, but you know I cannot produce her. She is in the hands of the Land Sharks."

"You kin squirm outer er mighty small boel!" snorted the old miner, in disgust. "Allee samee, you hain't out *this* time, by er long shot. You know jest whar Leetle Buttercup is, an' you've g'tter peach ur swaller lead, amen!"

There was a deadly ring to Plug's voice, and the gambler felt the old man was in earnest. Just what move to make next Frank could not determine.

Sudden shouts came from the street without. A man thrust his head in at the door of the saloon and yelled:

"Fire, fire! Wake up, you critters, an' hustle! Ther bull nort' eend of ther town's all blazin'. Fire, fire!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TRAITOR'S DOOM.

In another moment there was a mad rush for the doors, the throng seeming to forget everything else but a wild desire to reach the vicinity of the conflagration.

With a cry of rage, Old Plug Ugly sprang toward Four Ace Frank, having but one thought, to grasp the gambler and prevent him from escaping in that swirl of excitement.

Something heavy struck the old man a crushing blow on the head, a thousand lights danced before his eyes, and, with a groan that was half a curse, he sunk on his hands and knees, only keeping himself from falling prostrate by a mighty effort, everything becoming dark around him.

The ruffian who had stricken the veteran down flashed a knife over his back, but the murderous blow was not delivered.

Like a battering-ram, driven straight from the shoulder, Jack Howard's fist struck the bloodthirsty wretch just under the right ear, fairly lifting him off his feet and hurling him headlong to the floor, where he lay quivering without making an immediate attempt to rise.

"Are you badly hurt, Plug?" asked Jack, anxiously.

"I reckon not," gritted the plucky old fellow. "But, thet devil—thet double dastard—he's got clean plum' off!"

His chief thought was of the gambler's escape. Jack assisted the old miner to his feet, but Plug was a bit dizzy from the effect of that telling blow.

"I am afraid you are seriously hurt," persisted the young man.

"Git out! It wuz jest er leetle weenty tap on ther cabezal! You must think ther ole man's gittin' powerful weak in ther knees. I don't callate I'd drapped ef I hedn't stubbed my fut 'ginst suthin' ur ruther. But, w'at's ther matter with *thet* critter?"

"He is the wretch who knocked you down, and he was about to knife you in the back when I let him have."

"Is thet so? Waal, I reckon I owe ye one, lad."

"Not by any means! Didn't you save me from the knife of Four Ace Frank a short time ago?"

"S'pose I did."

"That makes the account come nearer balancing, although I know I am still deeply in your debt. You are as true a friend as man ever had, and—"

"Oh, stow thet, boy! Don't sling thet kind o' stuff at ther ole man, 'less ye wants him ter shake ye. I can't stan' it."

However, their hands met in a warm grasp.

"Now, I'll 'low we'd best git out an' see whar ther fire is thet galoot whooped erbout."

Jack hesitated, casting a glance toward the man he had knocked down.

"Never mine thet critter, boy; we hain't got no time ter fuss with him. We're arter bigger game, heap sight. Thet four ace skunk 'proved ther chance ter slope, an' it's him we're lookin' fer. He's our mutton."

"Are you all right now?"

"To be course I bel! W'at d'yer think I'm made of, anyhow! Come on."

With a steady step, the old miner led the way from the saloon.

When they reached the street they saw people rushing toward the north side of the camp, above the buildings of which a red glow was rising.

For some reason, the thought that the alarm might be a trick of some kind suddenly assailed Old Plug Ugly, even though his eyes seemed to give him evidence that it was genuine. Still he spoke no word as they hurried along the street.

Pick Pocket was not a large camp, but long

before they reached the upper end they met clusters of two and three men returning, some laughing, some swearing.

"Hold on, pard!" cried a voice, as the two men were sighted. "It's a clean give-away. We are sold."

"How's that?" asked Plug, coming to a halt.

"It's nuthin' but er bresh-heap as some critter fired," answered another.

An exclamation of disgust came from the old miner's lips.

"Derned ef I didn't smell suthin' crooked!" he muttered. "Ther game worked slick."

"What game?" asked Jack, catching his words.

"I 'low ther hull thing wuz played by some o' ther four ace critter's pards ter git him out o' ther scrape he seemed ter be slumpin' inter."

"I believe you are right, though I did not think of that before."

"Thet's ther size o' it; so we'll turn back. Cap'n Shark hes shook us fer ther present, but we'll spot ther critter erg'in."

The old man seemed to speak confidently, but Jack was assailed by doubt. The gambler had failed in his little game, but had given them the slip. Would he not improve the opportunity to leave Pick Pocket under cover of darkness? And if he did so, would not the chances be against their finding him again? The unfortunate lover groaned aloud.

As if that groan had given expression to his companion's fears, Old Plug hastened to say:

"He hain't goin' ter 'scape us, lad, don't ye think he am! It may look thet way now, but ther skunk 'll git w'at's due him in ther end. I say his day is mighty nigh done, fer I feel it in my ole bones."

"I hope so, but luck has run against me so long!"

"Not so very long, lad. Reckon ther time duz seem er bit drowed out, but it wuz er derned few days ergo thet ye saw this p'ison varmint ther fu'st time. I wuz with him w'en he fu'st sot eyes on Leetle Zoe, an' 'lowed he'd hev ter become your rival. Ef I'd only knowed jest then w'at'd follered, I'd blowed ther hull roof o' his miser'ble head off an' tuck ther quincequonces!"

He meant just what he said. Rather than have seen harm come to Little Zoe, he would have reddened his hands with the blood of the wretch who meditated doing her a wrong.

"With Bud Kemp fer an ally, we kin hunt Cap'n Shark to his las' stand," asserted Plug. "He hes turned several o' ther ban' erg'in' their ole chief, an' he wuz talkin' straight w'en he said ev'ry man-jack o' 'em feared ther boss 'stid o' respected him. He's doomed sure ez shootin', fer his own men will go back on him w'en they see thar hain't ther least bit o' er chance fer him ter come out top o' ther heap. Since he's bin chief—a mighty short while—he hain't never done any stroke o' work thet hes brung in any boodle, an' ther Sharks hain't reskin' their necks fer ther fun o' ther thing. They're inter thet business fer wealth."

But Jack was not easily cheered. It was little wonder he was despondent, under the circumstances. Things had turned against him at the sunniest moment of life, and now even the girl he loved so dearly believed him a black-hearted wretch. But for faithful Old Plug he would have given over to despair.

"Ther four ace varlet's got enemies we ain't counted on, boy," continued the miner. "Thar's thet thar Bad Man—"

Jack could not repress a bitter laugh; but Plug went on hastily:

"I dunno jest w'at ter make o' thet critter, but I'll 'low he hain't presactly w'at he seems. He 'peered ter be on Four Ace's side at ther fu'st, but now I'm reckopin' thet wuz only er trick. I know I guv him er spankin' oncet, but thet wuz ez much er s'prise ter me as ter anybody else. It wuz done too blamed easy. I felt 'most 'shamed o' it at the time, an' sence then I've thought as how ther leetle runt may hev let me spank him jest so's ter kerry out his part all ther better. An' thet t'other one—"

"The one in mask?"

"Yep, ther dumb critter."

"What do you make of him?"

"Thar, now you are axin me suthin'! I will 'low he is ther enemy o' ther four ace critter, ur I don't know shucks."

"He struck at the villain's life."

"An' w'u'd 'a' got it ef 'tadn't bin fer you."

"True enough. Do you think he is dumb?"

"Nother thing you've axed me! Can't say, but I dunno w'y he sh'u'd decline ter talk 'less he wuz."

"A trick—Hellow! what's the stir?"

A cluster of excited men were gathered at one side of the street, and toward them Old Plug and his pard quickly moved, asking what had happened.

"Found er stiff side o' ther buildin' hyer," was the reply. "It wuz layin' thar by ther wall, stretched on the groun'. He is ther feller as guv out as Four Ace Frank wuz ther chief of ther Ian' Starks."

They made their way to where the body lay stretched on its back. Old Plug knelt beside it, striking a match as he did so and throwing the light into the dead man's face.

"Good Lawd!" he gasped. "It's Bud Kemp! They've wiped him out, 'tarnal quick!"

Jack bent and silently pointed to the haft of a knife rising directly over the breast of the corpse. That weapon told how the man had come to his death, but the words on the slip of paper attached to it told still more, although they numbered but three. They were:—

"Death to traitors!"

"Thet's ernough!" hoarsely exclaimed Old Plug Ugly. "Ef thet hain't proof thet this man spoke ther truth w'en he said Four Ace Frank wuz Cap'n Shark, then you may call me an o'nery ole fool, amen!"

And the murmur that passed from lip to lip plainly said the men agreed with him.

"Looker hyer!" suddenly cried one of the party. "W'at's ther meanin' of thet red light toward ther south side? Ther bresh-pile fire is t'other way. Is it ernother fire—or w'at is it?"

By moving into the center of the street they were able to see the building from whence the red glow came, and one man shouted:

"It's er shore 'nuff fire this time, pards! Dern my eyes ef Granny Snooks's ranch hain't burnin'!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BACK FROM THE DEAD!

"STIDDY, pard!" cautioned Old Plug Ugly. "Don't go rampin' off, head up an' tail risin'! Jest keep yer level! This may be ernother trick, though I do 'low it looks monst'rus like ther ginnywine artikill."

"There is a building afire this time surely. Come on, old pard!"

"I'm with ye, lad. Ev'rybody's rushin' fer ther place. Keep yer eyes wide open, Jack, fer some critter may try ter stick ye in ther back. Thet may be jest w'at this is fer. Look sharp fer ther four ace galoot."

"If I get my eyes on him, I will never take them off till he shows me the way to Zoe!"

Toward the building they hurried with the crowd, and soon there was no longer a doubt about its being a genuine conflagration that would do more damage than destroy a mass of rubbish.

"Hull bottom part's afire!" exclaimed Old Plug, as they joined the excited crowd around the building. "She's boun' ter go fer sure!"

An old white-haired hag-like woman was watching the fire and wringing her hands as she alternately wept and cursed.

"It's Granny Snooks," explained a man. "She's ther owner of the building, and she feels powerful cut up."

"Ther fool, ther fool!" mumbled the old woman, savagely shaking her clinched fist at the flames. "He got drunk an' sot it, an' now he'll scorch in his own fire! But ther gal—ther pore leetle gal 'll burn all ter—"

"What's that?" shouted Jack Howard, catching the crone's skinny arm in his grasp. "What did you say? The girl—what girl?"

Granny Snooks shrunk back with a snarl of mingled rage and fear but before she could speak again, Four Ace Frank dashed past shouting hoarsely:

"Great God! Zoe Bent is in there!"

Jack instantly released Granny Snooks's arm and dashed toward the burning building, following close at the heels of the gambler. Old Plug Ugly also followed, for he had heard the card sharp's words and understood their terrible meaning.

The men around the building shouted warningly to the three men who seemed to be mad as they plunged toward the fire. One tried to intercept Jack, but the young man's hard fist knocked his would-be rescuer down. His face was stern-set and his eyes seemed red as glowing coals as they reflected the light of the increasing fire.

"I will save her—my darling!—or die with her!"

Old Plug did not try to stop him. Indeed, the old man seemed more insane than his young pard. Through his clinched teeth came inarticulate sounds which might have been either curses or prayers.

Into that wild vortex of smoke and flame dashed the three men, to be swallowed from view of those outside.

"The mad fools!" exclaimed one. "What caused them to rush in there? They have gone to certain death!"

"Four Ace whooped out su'thin' 'bout a gal."

"Well, girl and all are gone!"

"I dunno 'bout thet. Hyer comes er ladder, an' it's only ther under part of ther ranch thet's afire now. Ef we kin git in at thet upper window—"

The man did not complete the sentence, but he had said enough to express his belief that there was a possible show for saving any one who should be in the upper part of the burning building.

The ladder was carried swiftly forward, and even as it was being raised to the window, a wild shout broke from the spectators.

At that very window appeared a man with a girlish figure in his arms!

The smoke rolled up so thickly, it was impossible to tell which of the three men who had entered the burning house it was; but the ladder

was quickly placed and the daring rescuer descended, bearing his precious burden in his arms.

It was Jack Howard, although his clothes and face had been so blackened and scorched that he looked little like his natural self. But he had saved Zoe—Little Zoe!—his darling!

Staggering like a drunken man, but still refusing to allow her to be taken from him, Jack bore her from the doomed building to a place of safety. He thought her unconscious, overcome by the smoke, but she was sleeping from the effect of the powerful drug Granny Snooks had mixed with the wine Four Ace Frank had ordered. Incredible, as it may seem, she slept through the wild scene of her rescue, unconscious of her terrible danger and of the fact that the lover whom she doubted had saved her from a horrible death!

Friendly hands were ready, and although he would not give up his burden, Jack was assisted to keep on his feet till he could bear her to a cabin near by.

"I reckon t'other critters are goners," said one of the spectators. "Thar hain't no chance—Great king! thar they be!"

Out of the smoke and flames which wrapped the lower part of the building staggered a man who bore another in his arms. The clothes of both were afire in places, and their faces and hands were blackened and burned. It was evident one had been overcome while in the building and the other had rescued him by almost a superhuman effort.

The rescuer was Old Plug Ugly; the man he saved one whom he bated above all others!

Within a rod of the burning building, the old miner stumbled and fell, both men lying in a heap, neither offering to rise.

They were quickly caught up and carried from the scorching heat, the fire which had caught their clothes being extinguished. Cool water bathed their blistered faces and a few drops were forced between their lips.

Old Plug was the first to recover consciousness. He started up, glaring around like a madman.

"W'at—w'at is it? Fire! Yes, I 'member. He went in thar—Jack, my pard! But I saved him. I brought him out!"

His eyes fell on that smoke-blackened figure over which some of the men were working and he dragged himself toward it, laughing wildly:

"Thar he is—thar's ther boy! Poor lad! He hes lost her—Leetle Zoe! I'm erfraid thet will kill him when—W'at?"

He glared down into the face from which the beard had been burned away; surely that was not Jack's face? It was—

"Thet devil—thet curse ter humanity! An' I saved him? Ef I'd knowed, I'd left him thar ter taste o' ther hell he deserves!—An' Jack—my God! ther boy is burnin' in thet buildin'! Oh, curse ther black fate!"

He lifted his clinched hand and would have struck the scorched face of the man he had rescued, but his strength suddenly failed, and he sunk fainting by the side of his foe.

When the faithful old miner became conscious again, he was amazed to find Jack Howard's arms around his neck. At first he could not believe it anything but a hallucination, but when he was convinced it was really true, he actually wept for joy!

Four Ace Frank was conscious, and he called for Jack. As the young man bent over the moaning villain, the man of many crimes said, loud enough for those in the immediate vicinity to hear:

"This man is not Captain Shark. I am the leader of the outlaws myself—I swear it!"

Then he motioned for Jack to bend still lower. "Do not be afraid," came faintly from his lips, his disfigured face being contorted by a terrible agony. "I am dying—I will not harm you. I breathed fire back in that—that hell! This my last game—and I have lost it in the end. They tell me you saved Little Zoe."

"I did."

"Then I shall die easier. But—look into my face. The beard is gone—don't you know me?"

"No. The fire—"

"Ah! I did not think of that. Well, I am a man whom you supposed you killed years ago. But, I recovered—was restored through the wonderful skill of a great—French doctor. Your sword passed through my body, but it did not end my life."

"My God!" cried Jack. "It can not be you—"

"I am Walter Warwick—whom you thought you—killed in the forest of Fontainebleau! I am Antoinette's old ally. I wonder you never—suspected the truth."

Even then the young man could scarcely believe it possible, for all those years he had thought the man's blood on his hands. He had never doubted but the wound he inflicted was a mortal one, and his hurried departure from France had kept him from learning the truth.

"It would have—been better for you if—you had ended my life—then," gasped the dying man. "It would have saved—you trouble. I swore to have revenge. For years I—could not—find you. At last—I succeeded. You know—rest."

At this moment Bad Man Bob and his silent pard, the Masked Mystery, appeared at the doomed wretch's side.

"Do you know me, Steel Grip?" demanded the red-head, bending and glaring into the eyes of the dying man.

"That voice!" gasped the baffled villain. "It sounds like that—of one—who is dead!"

"You tried to kill me, Steel Grip, but I still live. I was your pard, your dupe, your tool; when you had no further use for me, you left your knife in my back. But I have lived, and shall live to see you die like a dog. Look!"

He removed the false beard and wig which he wore.

"Kid Kent!" gasped the gambler.

"Right," nodded the little man. "I played a part that deceived even your sharp eyes, my one object being your ultimate ruin. That ruin you brought on yourself. You will be dead before another sunrise."

"I shall be dead before another hour."

"And Antoinette—"

"I killed her!"

"She swore she would come back from the dead. *She is here!*"

Dumb Dick removed his mask and bent so the firelight fell full upon his white face.

"I haf come to see you die, Waltar! Eet will be one vera great pleasure!"

Lifting himself by a mighty effort, the sinful wretch fairly shrieked:

"Antoinette, alive—my God!"

Then he fell back—dead!

Antoinette's escape from the black hole known as the "Bottomless Pit" can be explained in a few words.

Through the place ran a sluggish stream of water. Into this she fell when cast into the place by the villain whom she had truly loved with the full passion of her strange heart. By chance—or was it fate!—she struck in a pool where the water was quite deep, and although she became unconscious, she was not killed.

When she recovered consciousness, she found her head resting on the sand, and the torch which the bats had knocked from her would-be murderer's hand was faintly burning at her side.

Dragging herself out of the water, she was enabled, aided by the torch, to find a passage out of the terrible place, although she was more dead than alive when she reached the open air.

By rare good fortune, she was met by the self-styled "Bad Man," who had deserted the party from Jericho after giving the false alarm by which Jack Howard's life was saved.

What followed till they appeared in the White Dove Saloon at Pick Pocket may be supplied by the imagination of the reader.

When Little Zoe awoke she found herself in her blind father's arms, the old man softly singing the lullaby song she had loved in her childhood. Her surroundings were strange, but—

"Oh, daddy, dear daddy!" clasping her arms around his neck; "then it was all a horrible, horrible dream!"

"Yes, little one," he softly murmured, "it was a dream. If they tell you different, don't believe them. There are some things I cannot understand, but I will never believe it was anything but a dream—never!"

"And Jack—"

"Is here," the young man half-rose from a comfortable chair close at hand, but Zoe drew back with a cry as she saw the bandage which concealed his face to the eyes.

"Had to have 'em," laughed Jack. "As it is, I am not so sure but my beauty is spoiled for good."

"But—but you are not—not Captain—"

"No, I am not Captain Shark. Have you forgotten that was a dream? Even some dreams require explanations, and this one shall be explained in due time, my pet!"

It was explained to the satisfaction of even Blind Bent himself. As the sightless father held Jack Howard's hand, he said, earnestly:

"Forgive me, boy! You know I cannot see. I meant you no wrong, and if these things did really happen— But I can't believe they did! It seems like a bad dream, and I will never acknowledge it was anything else."

Jack was not badly injured, and, when Little Zoe was strong enough, they went to Old Plug Ugly. The faithful old friend was groaning in bed, having been seriously burned in various parts; but, fortunately, he had not sucked the flames into his lungs, as the gambler had done. His honest eyes fairly shone as they rested on Jack and Little Zoe, and for the time he quite forgot his pain.

"This jest duz my soul good, amen!" came from his lips. "I'll git well anyhow, now! Don't s'pose my good looks will be 'proved any to mention, but I never wuz much ter look at. I'll kem roun' chipper in time ter shake er hoof at ther weddin', you bet! We're top o' ther heap, pard, bless our good luck!"

"An' ther leetle gal—Lawd love her—she don't seem ter look ther wu't fer all this wear. Them blue eyes is gems of ther fu'st watter,

boy, an' you've bin mighty lucky ter capter 'em. Now—"

"Now you just hush!" and Zoe's soft fingers fell on his lips, for she was blushing furiously.

"If you don't I'll—I will anyway!"

Her hand was removed to give her lips the place, and Old Plug nearly jumped out of bed in consternation.

"Good Lawd!" he gasped. "Thet fer me—sech er hombly ole sarnip! Better keep 'em fer Jack."

"There is enough for both," she laughingly declared.

The death of their second chief proved to be also the death-blow of the Land Sharks. The organization of lawless men passed out of existence, the survivors of the band disappearing from that part of the country, many of them meeting violent deaths in other sections.

Kid Kent and Antoinette were never seen in Pick Pocket or that region after the night when Captain Shark's life was destroyed by the fire accidentally set by one of his trusted tools. Whither they went or what became of them finally it is impossible to say.

The confession of the dying outlaw chief set Jack Howard right in the eyes of those who had looked suspiciously upon him, and the very men who had been his bitterest accusers were the most eager to do him honor.

With Little Zoe for a nurse, Old Plug Ugly recovered rapidly.

"Ef I wuz er leetle bit younger an' I thought thar wuz any chance fer me ter cut ye out, Jackie boy, I might play sick er dite longer jes' ter hev thet leetle angel hoverin' over me. But I know ther ole man hain't got no show ter steal her heart from ye, so I'm goin' ter git up roun' soon's possible an' git outer ther agony."

One day the stage bore four people from Pick Pocket. They were Old Plug, Jack, Little Zoe and her "daddy," all being en route for the East, Old Plug having been urged to go along, after he had expressed a desire to see the "eend o' it, amen."

A great crowd assembled to see them off, and the rough fellows nearly split their throats by cheering as the stage rolled away in a cloud of dust, Little Zoe's hand fluttering a white handkerchief from the window and her sweet face giving them a farewell smile.

Jack and Zoe are married now, and Blind Bent has a happy home with them. The most honored visitor who ever appears in that household is brave, noble, lion-hearted Old Plug Ugly.

THE END.

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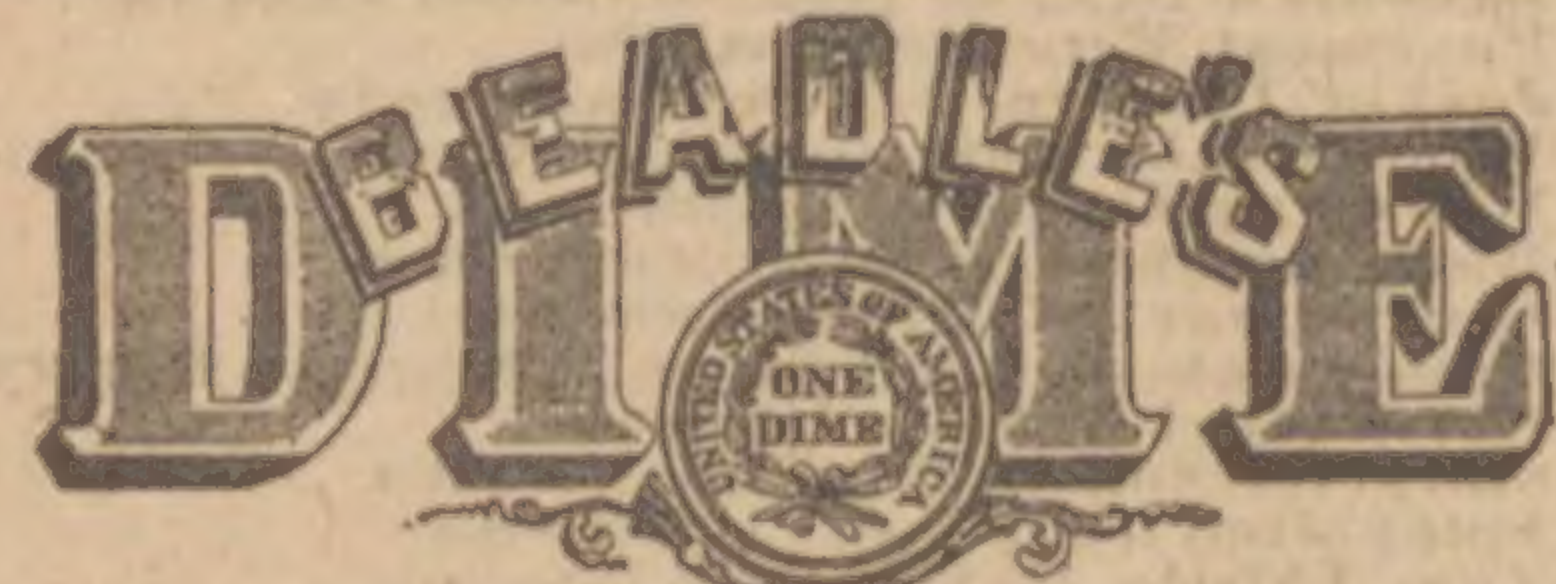
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